Business Traveller MIDDLE EAST

JANUARY 2025

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ON TRACK

The Middle East's rail sector is on the move

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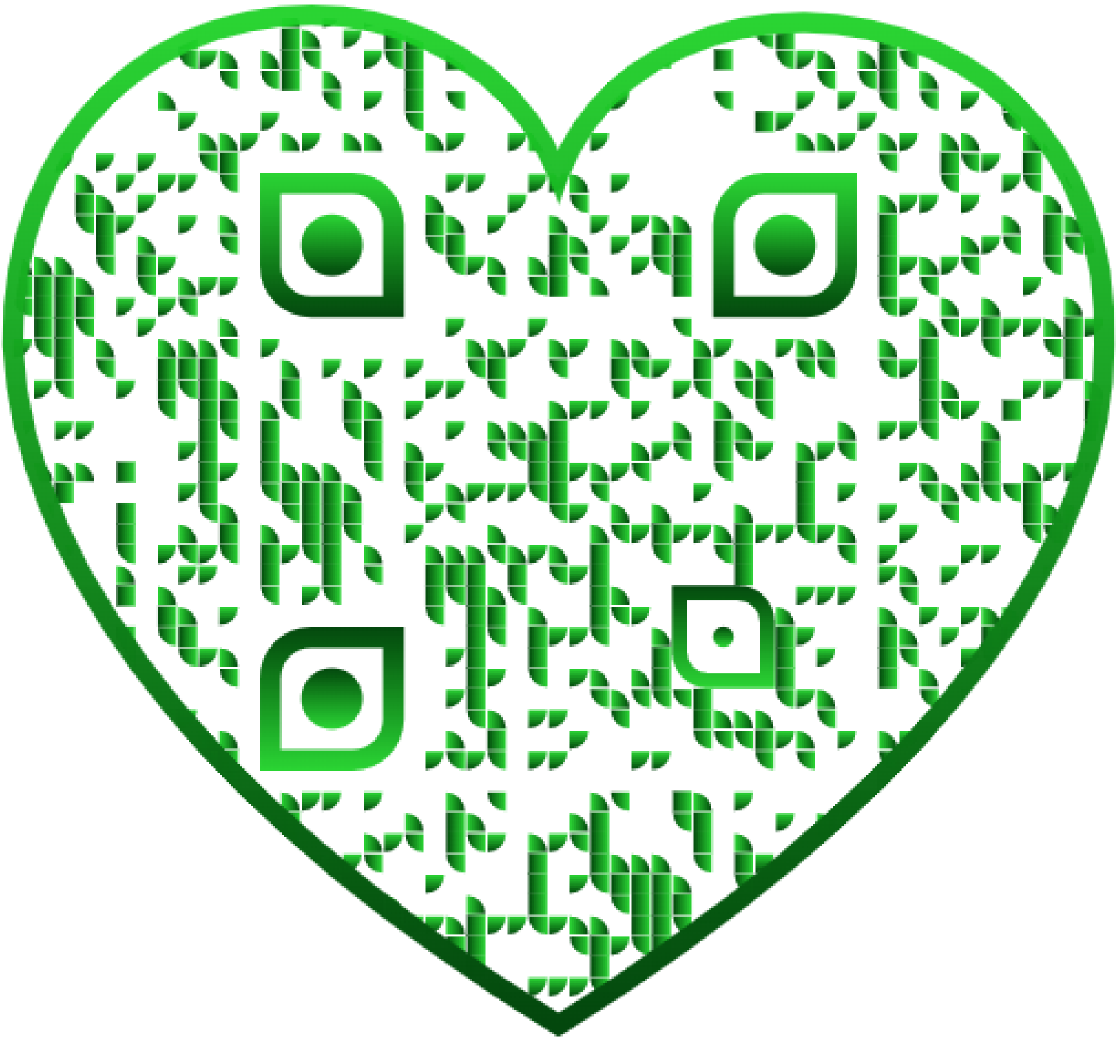

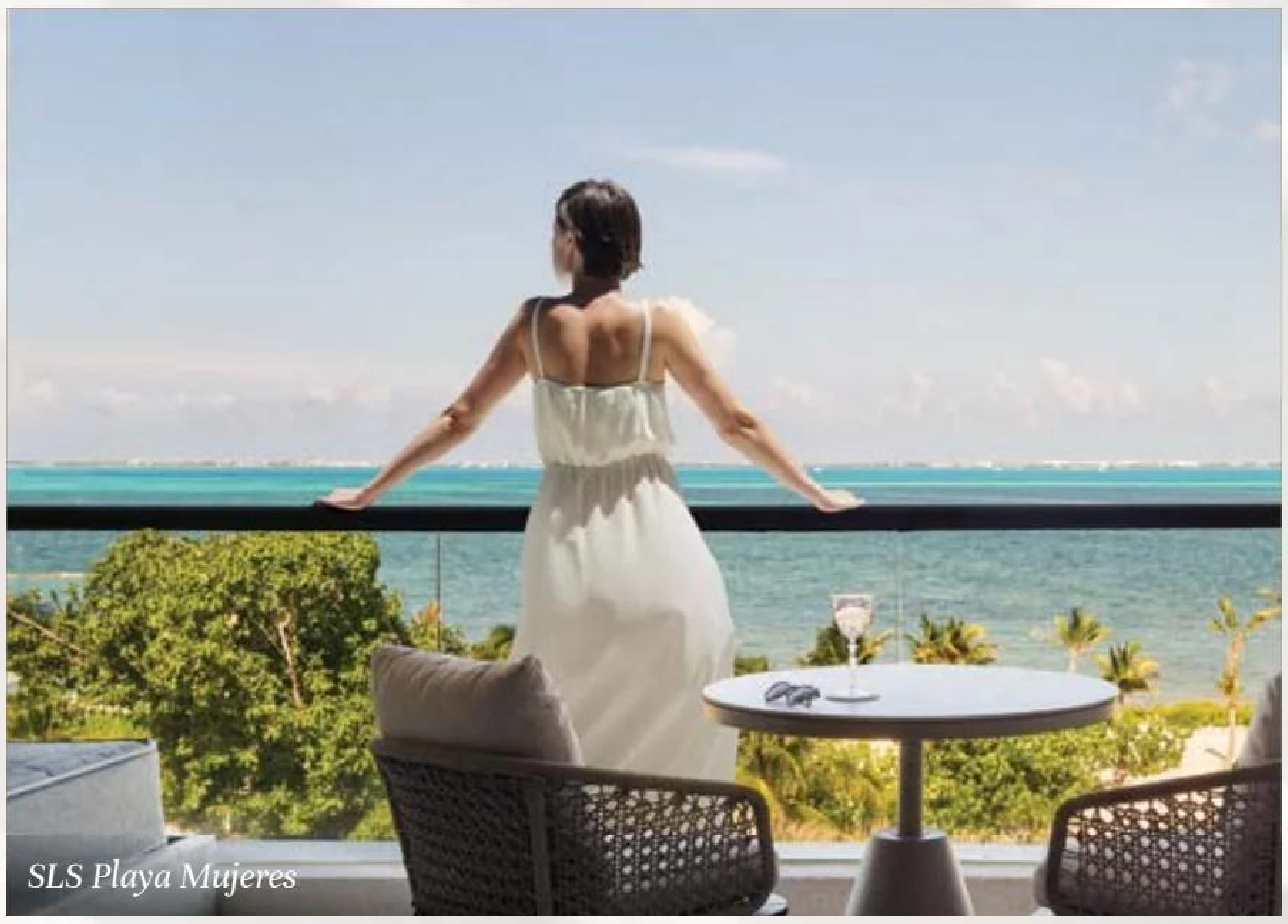
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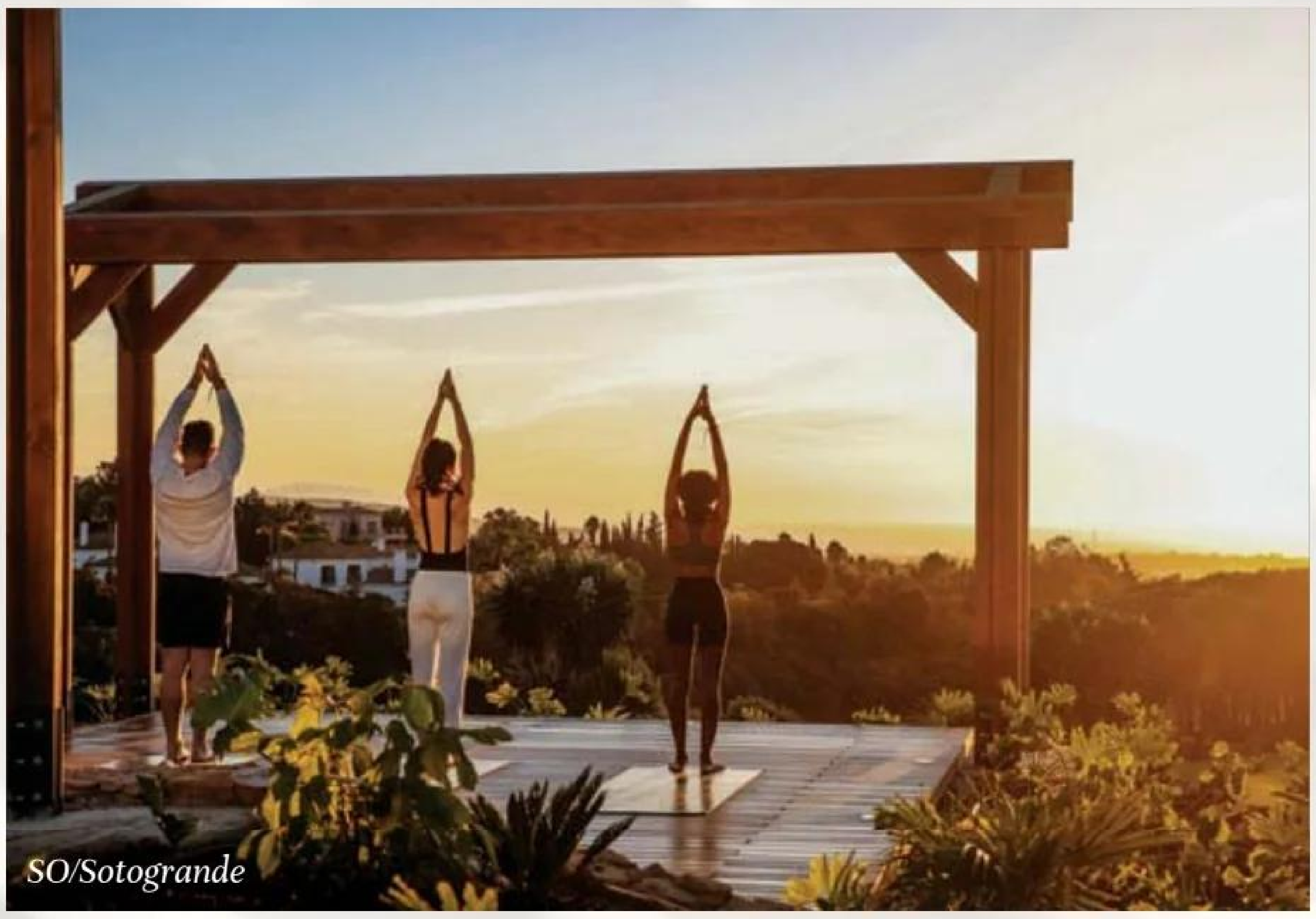
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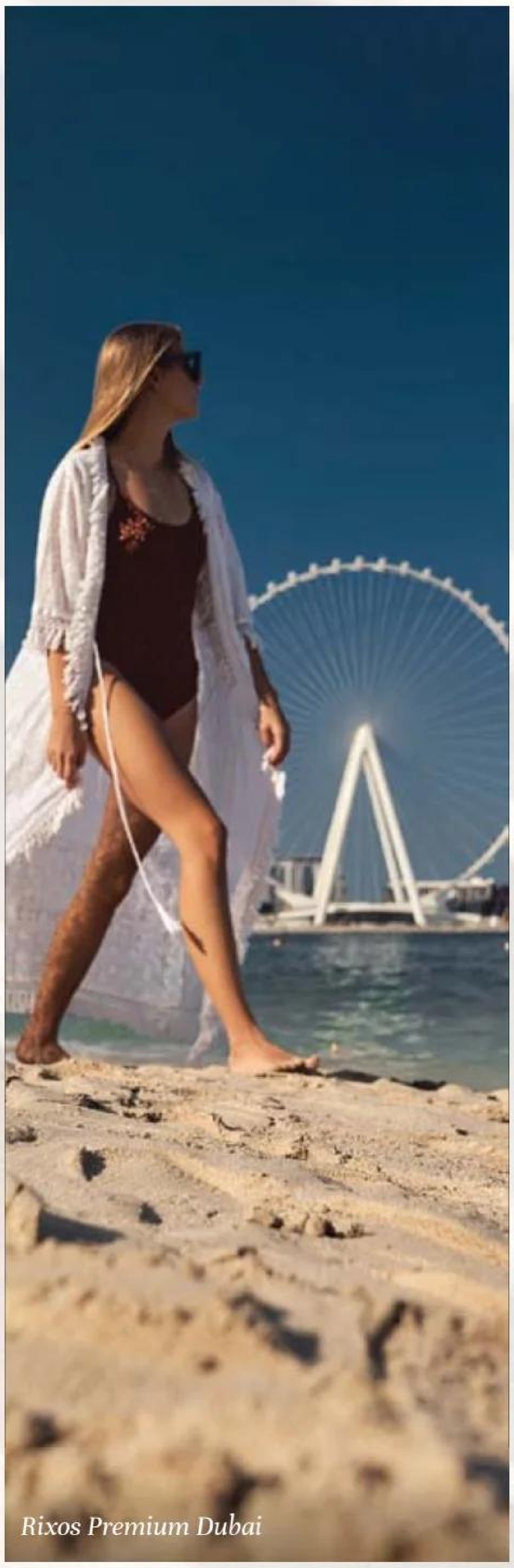
Rixos Premium Dubai

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COLLECTION

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JANUARY 2025

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Business Traveller MIDDLE EAST
ON TRACK
The Middle East's rail sector is on the move

COVER
A rendering of the Dream of the Desert luxury train

PHOTO BY
Arsenale S.P.A./ Saudi Arabia Railways

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ON TRACK
Train travel is heading towards a bright new future, and the Middle East's rail sector is on the move

IMAGES: SUPPLIED; GETTY IMAGES; ADOBE STOCKS

Various studies claim that, on average, around 88 per cent of people fail to achieve their New Year's Resolutions. Of the most commonly-cited reasons for this, the first is the tendency to aim too high, alongside the lack of a realistic plan. And as anyone who has dabbled in goal-setting would know, to achieve success, we typically need to begin by first identifying the goal clearly, before assigning specific metrics to aim for, then devising a strategic and realistic time-bound plan on how to get there. The second reason why so many New Year's Resolutions fail is because it may not actually be the right time to begin – not for all of us, anyway. While it can be tempting to jump on the bandwagon, we don't exist as a hive mind (even if social media sometimes makes it feel that way) – and rather than simply embarking on a new challenge because everyone else is, it is far more effective to set a goal that comes from a need for change, and not just for the sake of tradition. Because when you have a genuinely compelling reason to chase that goal, you are more likely to stick to it when the going gets tough. Which is, incidentally, the third reason why so many New Year's Resolutions, or other goals, might fail: the lack thereof. Finding your "why" is one of the single most important things you can do in both life and business. It will inform the way you handle obstacles. It will keep you motivated, in the most authentic way. It will keep you engaged, and once you have accomplished your goal, it will ensure that you can look over your achievements with a true sense of purpose. Finding our "why" is what can help steer us back in the right direction even if we veer a little off-track at times, without feeling like we'll ever just fly off the rails.

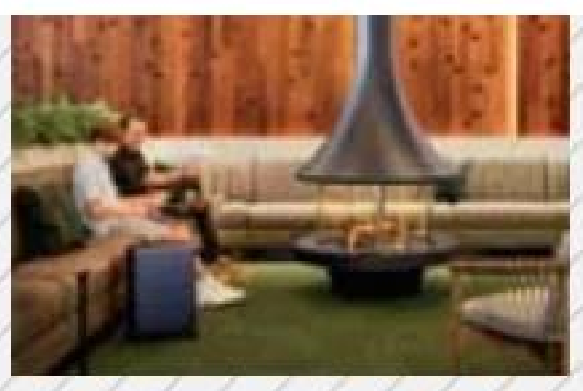
It's the reason why initiatives like Vision 2030 agendas – whether that's in the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, or Egypt – can be such a powerful driving force for positive change. The Middle East has accomplished a truly amazing series of goals in the past few decades already, with the evolution of the region's hospitality, aviation, tourism, and travel industry having shown what is possible with great vision and resolve. And as we look to the future, one exciting new realm is that of rail travel. Trains have long held a historic allure (p.46) and as we prepare for major progress in both freight and passenger rail infrastructure, it's thrilling to picture what this could mean for the region (p.14 and p.34).

As we look ahead to 2025, events are top of mind. A lot can happen in a year, and with global society increasingly valuing experiential as well as material things, the concept of planning travel around specific events isn't just a fad but a trend that's here to stay (p.38). Whether you're planning a trip to a hidden gem (p.50) or a long-standing favourite (p.66), or just trying to get healthier (p.54), the best aspect of a new year is the hope it can bring. Here's to celebrating the excitement of all the possibilities that lie ahead.

Yi-Hwa Hanna

Yi-Hwa Hanna
Editor

THIS ISSUE'S PICKS



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Airline lounges offering a premium space for all **P.26**

GIG ECONOMY
"Gig-tripping" – travelling for events – is a trend that's clearly here to stay **P.38**

WELLNESS WEARABLES
Gadgets to enhance mental and physical health **P.54**

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Business Traveller MIDDLE EAST

Business Traveller Middle East is jointly published by Motivate Media Group and Business Traveller Media Ltd

MOTIVATE MEDIA GROUP
Editor-in-Chief **Obaid Humaid Al Tayer**
Managing Partner and Group Editor **Ian Fairservice**
Chief Commercial Officer **Anthony Milne**

Editor **Yi-Hwa Hanna**
Art Director **Clarkwin Cruz**
Editorial Co-ordinator **Londresa Flores**
Contributors **Hannah Brandler, Vinay Bhaskara, Cheryl Robertson, Tom Otley, Zana Azeredo, Helen Dalley, Mark Caswell**
General Manager – Production **S Sunil Kumar**
Production Manager **Binu Purandaran**
Production Supervisor **Venita Pinto**

Group Sales Manager **Chaitali Khimji**
Senior Sales Manager **Murali Narayanan**

BUSINESS TRAVELLER MEDIA LTD.
Managing Director **Julian Gregory**
Group Publisher **Rania Apthorpe**

MOTIVATE MEDIA GROUP

HEAD OFFICE: Media One Tower, Dubai Media City, PO Box 2331, Dubai, UAE; Tel: +971 4 427 3000; Fax: +971 4 428 2266; E-mail: btme@motivate.ae

DUBAI MEDIA CITY: SD 2-94, 2nd Floor, Building 2, Dubai, UAE; Tel: +971 4 390 3550; Fax +971 4 390 4845

ABU DHABI: PO Box 43072, Abu Dhabi, UAE; Tel: +971 2 677 2005; Fax: +971 2 657 3401; Email: motivate-adh@motivate.ae

SAUDI ARABIA: Regus Offices No. 455 - 456, 4th Floor, Hamad Tower, King Fahad Road, Al Olaya, Riyadh, KSA
Tel: +966 11 834 3595 / +966 11 834 3596
Email: motivate@motivate.ae

LONDON: Motivate Publishing Ltd, Acre House, 11/15 William Road, London, NW1 3ER, UK; E-mail: motivateuk@motivate.ae

Ink Business Traveller

BUSINESS TRAVELLER MEDIA LTD.
Ink, Blackburn House, Blackburn Road, London, NW6 1RZ

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SUBSCRIPTIONS:
Email: subscriptions@motivate.ae; **Tel:** +971 4 427 3542
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Ink

ExecuJet Middle East opens ultra-luxury private jet facility at Dubai South

EXECUJET MIDDLE EAST – a partnership between Luxaviation Group and Alpha Middle East Holdings, and a leader in private aviation – has opened a new state-of-the-art private jet terminal at the Mohammed bin Rashid Aerospace Hub in Dubai South. Poised to redefine private travel in the region, the 15,000 sqm facility aims to combine operational excellence with ultra-luxury, and advance Dubai's position as a global aviation hub.

The new terminal features exclusive suites including the Middle East's first airside suite, a private cocktail and cigar lounge, and a Majlis lounge designed by acclaimed regional designer Nada Debs. Its look and feel aim to reflect Arabian hospitality with a contemporary edge. It also features an expansive climate-controlled 7,000 sqm hangar to ensure security and privacy for clients and their aircraft, as well as a suite of bespoke services for business and leisure travellers, from a high-tech conference room and private spa and grooming services to an exclusive kids' lounge. It is complemented by a cutting-edge Dassault Aviation-owned MRO, which will work to deliver state-of-the-art maintenance, repair, and overhaul services across a wide range of OEM products.

ExecuJet
MIDDLE EAST

flydubai launches new business class lounge at Dubai International Airport

THE LOUNGE, which reflects the airline's clean and modern decor, spans across 900 sqm and can accommodate more than 200 passengers at a time. Located just after the passport control and security lanes at Dubai International Airport's Terminal 2 Departures area, it also has its own boarding gate within the lounge – from which passengers can also board dedicated Business Class buses for their flights. These buses also feature recent upgrades, including expanded technological assets and even more spacious seating. It has comfortable spaces for both relaxation and productivity, including plenty of plug outlets and charging stations, workstations, and even a quiet zone with spa-like soothing reclined seats. Customers can enjoy food and beverages from a range of dining options including a buffet of international cuisine, as well as an à la carte option. The lounge also has shower facilities, a prayer room, and other practical amenities such as complimentary wifi.

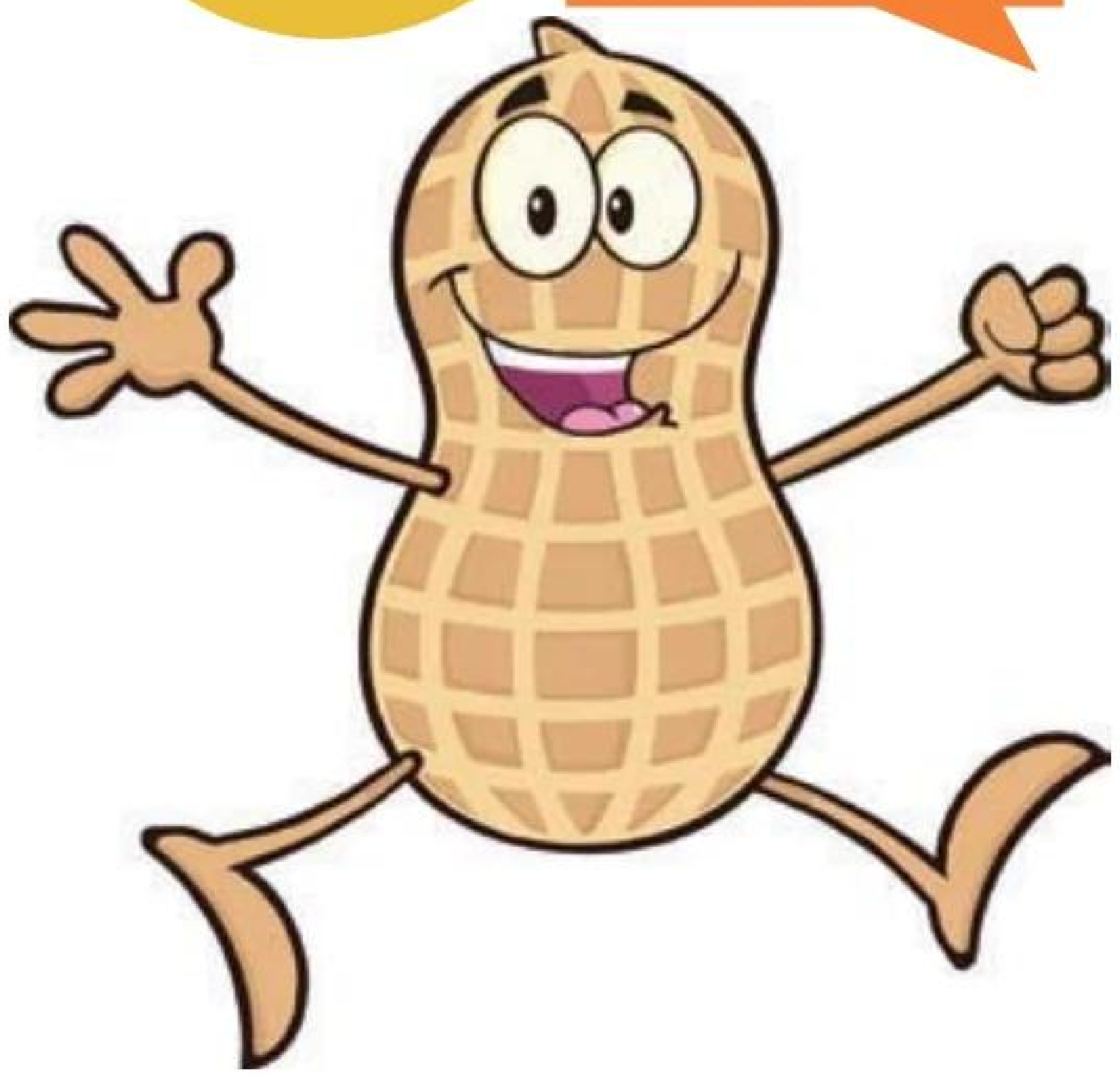
QATAR AIRWAYS FITS 15 BOEING 777S WITH STARLINK WIFI

AFTER QATAR AIRWAYS launched its first Boeing-777 fitted with Starlink's "ultra-high-speed, low-latency" internet technology in October 2024 – initially aiming to roll this out to 12 of its Boeing aircraft by the end of last year – the airline exceeded its original target by upgrading 15 777s by mid-December. It is currently working to fit its entire fleet of 777 aircraft with the technology by this year, before starting work on its Airbus A350s in summer 2025. Passengers can access the Starlink service free of charge on equipped aircraft, enabling them to stream content, play games and upload or download files as they would on the ground.

Hilton to open 25 new hotels across Egypt

PLANS INCLUDE the signing of more than ten new properties under the global hospitality company's award-winning brands, which will triple Hilton's presence in Egypt. New signings include Hilton's lifestyle brand, Tapestry Collection by Hilton – which will mark its debut on the African continent – as well as Egypt's first Curio Collection by Hilton; an all-inclusive resort under the Hilton Hotels & Resorts brand; and the highly anticipated Hilton Cairo Nile Maadi – which is set to open in 2025. The Abu Dabbab Lodge, Tapestry Collection by Hilton, will be a premium eco-friendly resort with 92 guest rooms and suites, four dining venues, two swimming pools, a fully-equipped fitness centre, and a dedicated diving centre offering high-quality marine experiences. Several hotels in Hilton's Egypt portfolio are also currently undergoing refurbishments to modernise their interiors, including Ramses Hilton, Hilton Pyramids Golf, and Hilton Cairo Heliopolis. In Marsa Alam, Hilton Marsa Alam Nubian Resort will undergo a major refurbishment, that will encompass the addition of 66 guest rooms and suites. Meanwhile, DoubleTree by Hilton Sharm El Sheikh – Sharks Bay Resort is undergoing a full renovation, with the first phase of 270 guest rooms slated for completion by June 2025.

LOST IN TRANSLATION



Idioms from around the world that have us scratching our heads. This issue, it's a Chilean expression.

Phrase: *Salto lejos el mani*
Literally: *Look how far the peanut has jumped*
Meaning: *When someone meddling in another's business or conversation over-reaches, or exaggerates something that isn't major, and should mind their own business*

Marriott International to debut Moxy hotel in Dubai

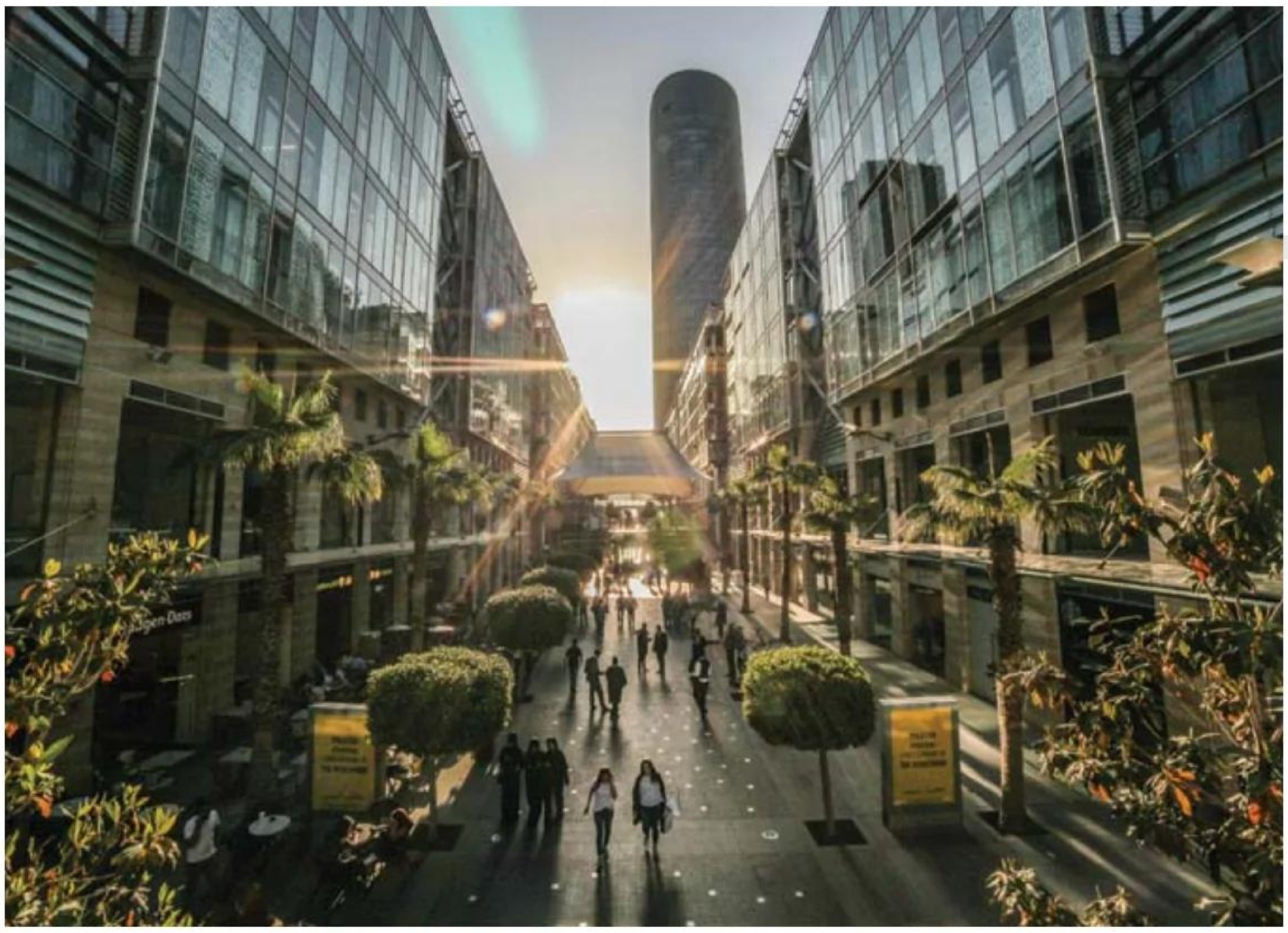
MARRIOTT INTERNATIONAL has signed an agreement with Al Ali Property Investments (API) to bring the first-ever Moxy Hotel to Dubai. Known for its stylish and playful experiential vibe, it will be located in the Al Barsha neighbourhood. The hotel is a conversion of an existing property that will undergo a brand positioning process and refurbishment before opening as the Moxy Hotel in the summer of 2025.

Moxy Hotels has gained a reputation for "breaking the rules of a conventional hotel stay" since its inception a decade ago. Today, the brand has established itself as a leader in the upper midscale lifestyle segment across the globe, with over 135 properties in operation across more than 25 countries.

The Moxy Al Barsha Dubai will have 480 guestrooms, designed for travellers that are young at heart. Among its various features will be buzzworthy public spaces, and communal tables offering plenty of opportunities to guests to plug and play.

Etihad begins codeshare with Air Astana

ETIHAD AIRWAYS began a new bilateral codeshare with Air Astana in December 2024. The partnership gives Etihad's customers convenient access to 10 destinations through Air Astana's gateways in Almaty and in Astana – all of which are new to Etihad's extended network – while opening up Etihad Airways' flight network to Air Astana customers. The arrangement simplifies the travel experience for guests of both airlines, allowing them to make a single booking and undergo a seamless check-in process, along with the added convenience of having their baggage transferred to their final destination.



IHG to debut voco brand in Amman, Jordan

IHG HOTELS & RESORTS has signed a deal with Abdali Boulevard Company to launch its premium voco brand in Jordan. The voco Abdali Amman will be the brand's debut in the country, located on The Abdali Boulevard – an upscale entertainment thoroughfare with 12 buildings across three blocks. The Abdali has more than 85 restaurants, a multitude of fashion stores, hospitality offerings, residential apartments, and more than 500 specialised businesses across 27 sectors in total. The new property will have multiple diverse dining options itself, along with meeting venues, a fitness centre and outdoor recreation spaces. It will feature 392 keys, and is scheduled to open by December 2025. The voco Abdali Amman is a conversion property that is currently operating as The Abdali Boulevard Hotel. Launched in 2018, voco is one of IHG's fastest-growing brands globally.

Qatar Airways appoints Novak Djokovic as their Global Brand Ambassador and Wellness Advisor

THE QATAR FLAG CARRIER announced a partnership with Novak Djokovic towards the end of 2024, appointing the tennis legend as their new Global Brand Ambassador and Wellness Advisor. A multi-year collaboration, the partnership will also position Qatar Airways as Djokovic's Official Airline Partner. Through the partnership, Qatar Airways will leverage its global network and premium branding opportunities to connect with Djokovic and his extensive fan base. Among these will be unique activations at premier tennis tournaments, including hospitality experiences for passengers and partners at Grand Slam events. Qatar Airways will be working with Djokovic to further elevate the Qatar ExxonMobil Open, a prestigious tournament held since 1993. Through the partnership, the two parties will highlight a commitment to promoting well-being.

Global Ambassado and Wellness Advis
QATAR AIRWAYS
NOVAK DJOKOVIC

Etihad to double its routes to Africa within the coming year

ETIHAD AIRWAYS has announced that it will be doubling its number of routes to the African continent over the coming year, with three new African routes having been revealed in the last couple of months of 2024, and more destinations and frequencies to come.

The UAE carrier currently flies to four destinations in Africa: Johannesburg, South Africa; Cairo, Egypt; Mahe, Seychelles; and Casablanca, Morocco. From 15 December, 2024, the airline resumed flights to Nairobi, Kenya, and this year, it will launch new routes to Tunis, Tunisia; Algiers, Algeria; and Al Alamein, Egypt.

IMAGES: SUPPLIED

Marriott and Hilton each to open three new hotels in Madinah, Saudi Arabia

MARRIOTT INTERNATIONAL has signed an agreement with Saudi Arabia's Knowledge Economic City (KEC) to open three hotels within the Holy City of Madinah. The new properties – Courtyard by Marriott, Four Points by Sheraton, and Residence Inn by Marriott – will be part of the KEC master development. Between the three of them, they will add 1,200 rooms to Marriott's portfolio in the kingdom.

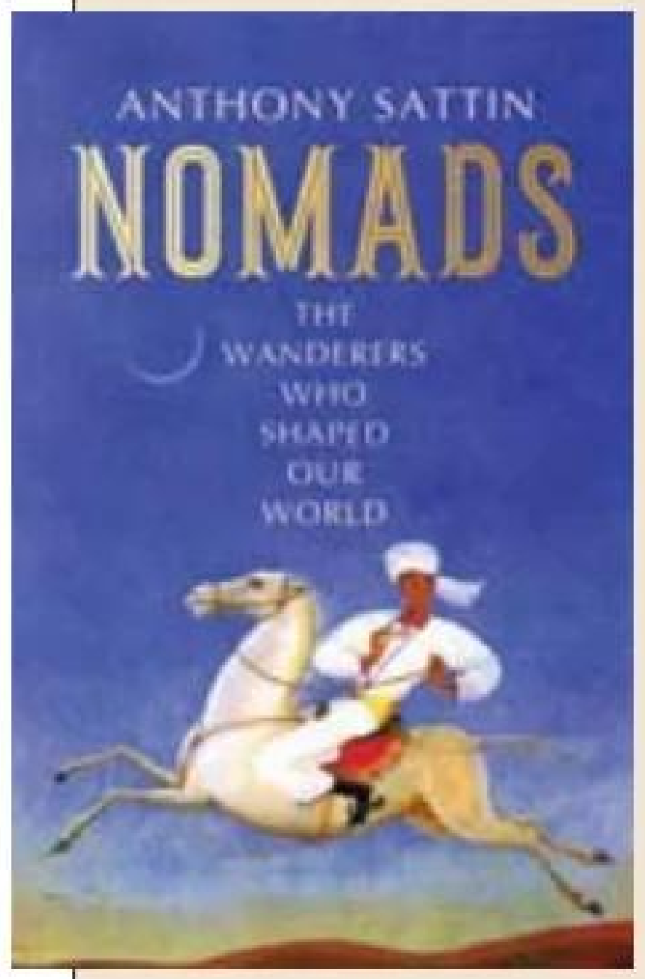
Meanwhile, Hilton Hotels has signed a deal with Al-Gharaa International for Real Estate Development, to open three new hotels in the Islamic World District of Knowledge Economic City (KEC) in Saudi Arabia's Madinah. The agreement marks the debut of Hilton's award-winning extended stay brand, Home2 Suites by Hilton, in the Middle East & Africa (MEA) region. The property will be joined by the Hampton by Hilton Madinah KEC Islamic World District, and the Hilton Garden Inn Madinah KEC Islamic World District.

Qatar Airways features Kevin Hart in its new in-flight safety video

QATAR AIRWAYS launched a new in-flight safety video last month, starring comedian, actor, entrepreneur and recently-appointed Qatar Airways Global Brand Ambassador, Kevin Hart. Directed by Hollywood director Tim Story, the video features Hart and other stars – including supermodel and actress Rosie Huntington-Whiteley, as well as internet personalities Anwar and Amal Jibawi, Khaby Lame, and Adam Waheed – presenting the airline's in-flight safety procedures in a short and entertaining film. The new video is hoped to help catch the attention of passengers who are increasingly distracted by modern technology, ensuring they won't want to miss it and in doing so, prioritising their safety.

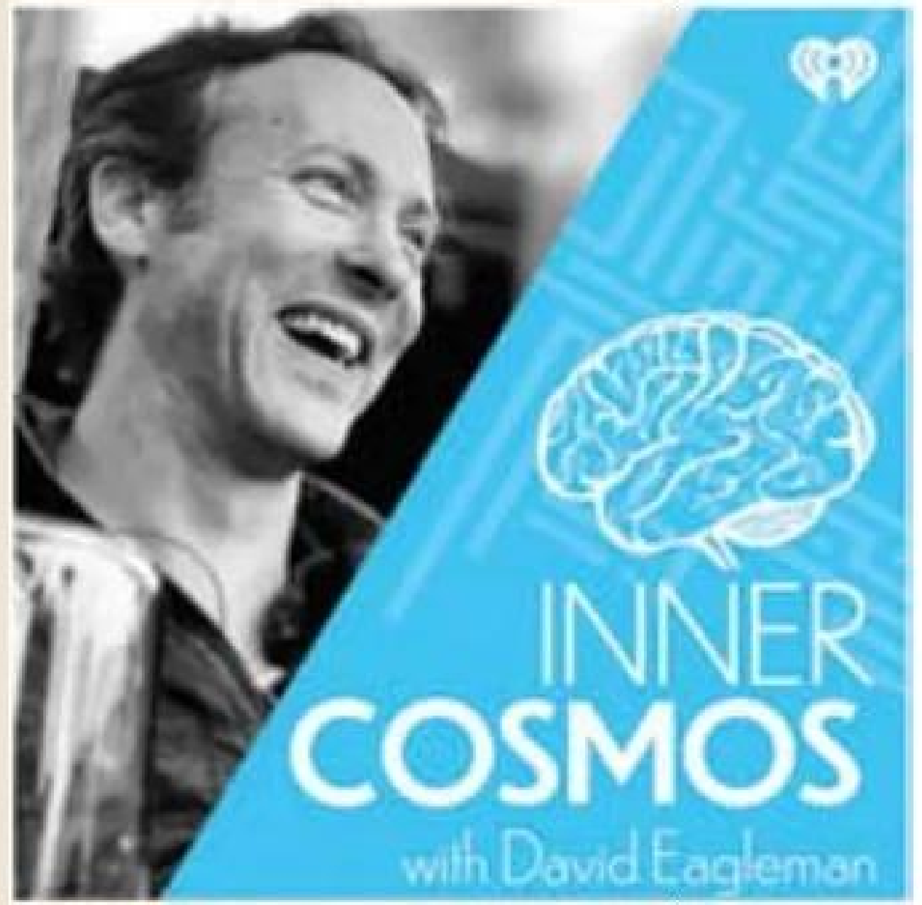
INFLIGHT ENTERTAINMENT

Our picks to make time fly by



READ: ***Nomads: The Wanderers Who Shaped Our World, Anthony Sattin***
An exploration of Nomadic cultures through millennia – and their impact on the way we live – Sattin was inspired to write the book after having lived in Cairo, where he heard stories about Bedouins in the Western Desert, in the Sinai, and near the Sudan border. After encountering nomadic people in places like central Asia, the Thar desert, Iran's Zagros Mountains, and beyond Timbuktu, he started thinking about how humans lived on the move before they began to settle – and how nomads have shaped our world, but are not in history books. The book took him eight years to complete.
Magrudy's, Dhs157.50

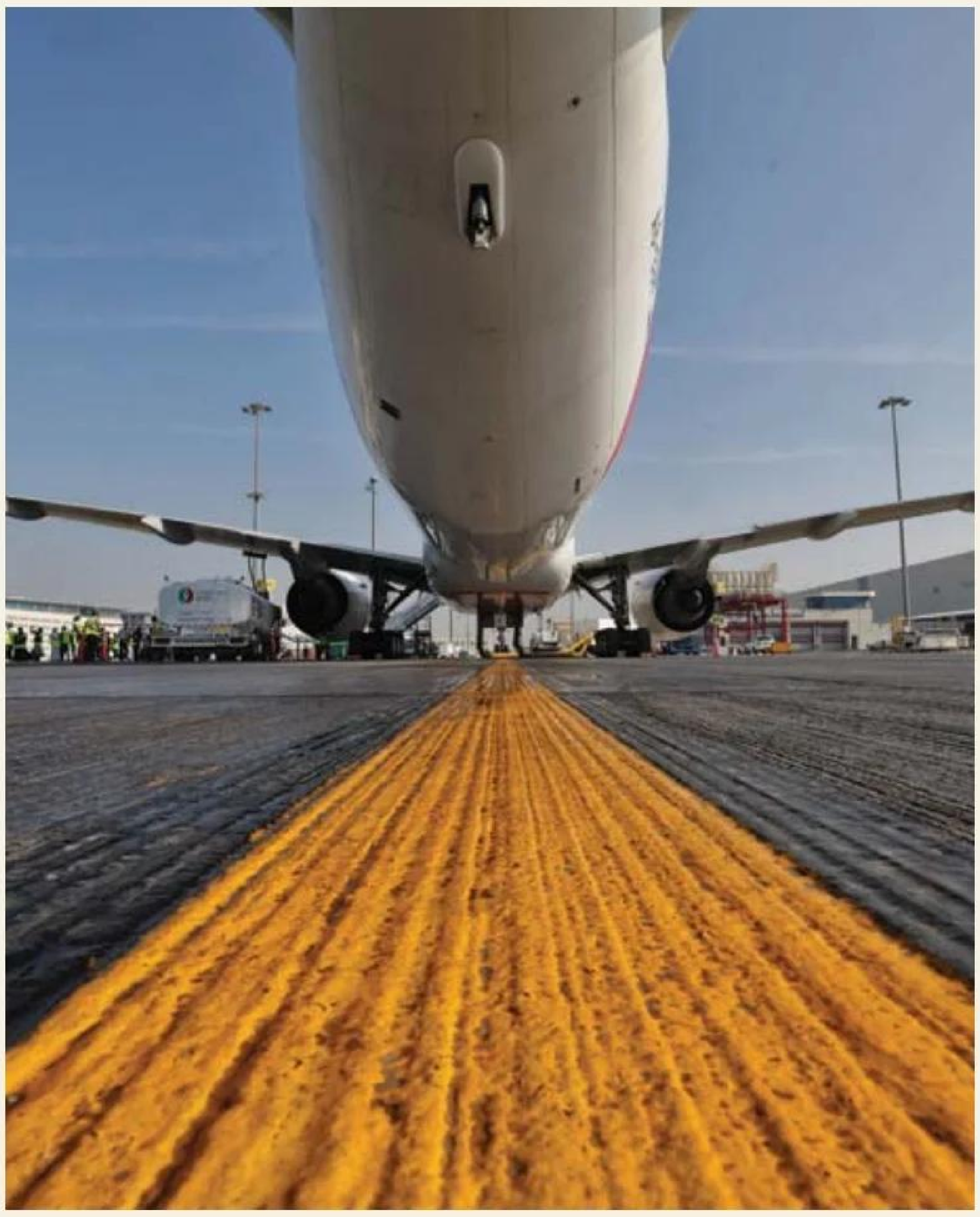
LISTEN: ***Inner Cosmos with David Eagleman***
Neuroscientist and author David Eagleman – who also teaches neuroscience at Stanford University, is the CEO and co-founder on Neosensory, and has served as scientific advisor to several TV shows, such as *Westworld* – discusses how the brain interprets the world, and what that means for us. Available on Spotify.



WATCH: ***Buy Now – The Shopping Conspiracy***
This subversive documentary unpacks the tricks brands use to keep their customers consuming — and the real impact they have on our lives and the world.. Available on Netflix.

IMAGES: SUPPLIED

IATA PUSHES IMPORTANCE OF SAF



THE INTERNATIONAL AIR TRANSPORT ASSOCIATIPON (IATA) has underlined the importance of prioritising the production and use of Sustainable Aviation Fuel (SAF). New estimates on SAF production released in December 2024 found that SAF volumes are increasing, but "disappointingly slowly", according to Willie Walsh, IATA's Director General. "With airlines, the core of the value chain, earning just a 3.6 per cent net margin, profitability expectations for SAF investors need to be slow and steady, not fast and furious. But make no mistake that airlines are eager to buy SAF and there is money to be made by investors and companies who see the long-term future of decarbonisation. Governments can accelerate progress by winding down fossil fuel production subsidies and replacing them with strategic production incentives and clear policies supporting a future built on renewable energies, including SAF," Walsh said. Marie Owens Thomsen, IATA's Senior VP of Sustainability and Chief Economist, explained that the industry's decarbonisation must be seen as part of the global energy transition, not compartmentalised as a transport issue. Doing so will benefit the wider economy, she said. Suggested measures to expand SAF production and accelerate its use include increasing co-processing, diversifying SAF production, and creating a global accounting framework.

Prince Mohammed bin Salman Royal Reserve succeeds in reintroducing an endangered species to Saudi Arabia

THE SUCCESSFUL REINTRODUCTION of the onager to Saudi Arabia marks the species' return to the kingdom after more than a century of absence. In April 2024, seven Persian onagers were translocated from the Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature's Shaumari Reserve in Jordan to the Reserve, establishing the first wild population in the kingdom in more than 100 years. Following their 935km journey, the onagers have adapted well to their new habitat, with the birth of the first foal in the reserve also having been recently celebrated – a significant milestone in rewilding efforts for both the reserve and Saudi Arabia.

"These are the first free-running onager seen in Saudi Arabia since their extinction in the early 1900s. Historically celebrated by Arabic poets, these strong, untamable, and elusive creatures are classified as Endangered by the IUCN, with fewer than 600 Persian onager remaining in the wild globally. Their reintroduction represents a transformative step for their conservation and a major landmark in the kingdom's biodiversity efforts," said Andrew Zaloumis, CEO of Prince Mohammed bin Salman Royal Reserve. This historic achievement was made possible through cross-border collaboration with Jordan's Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature (RSCN).

FUN FACT

NASA is funding new studies looking at the future of sustainable aircraft, through their Advanced Aircraft Concepts for Environmental Sustainability (AACES) 2050 initiative.

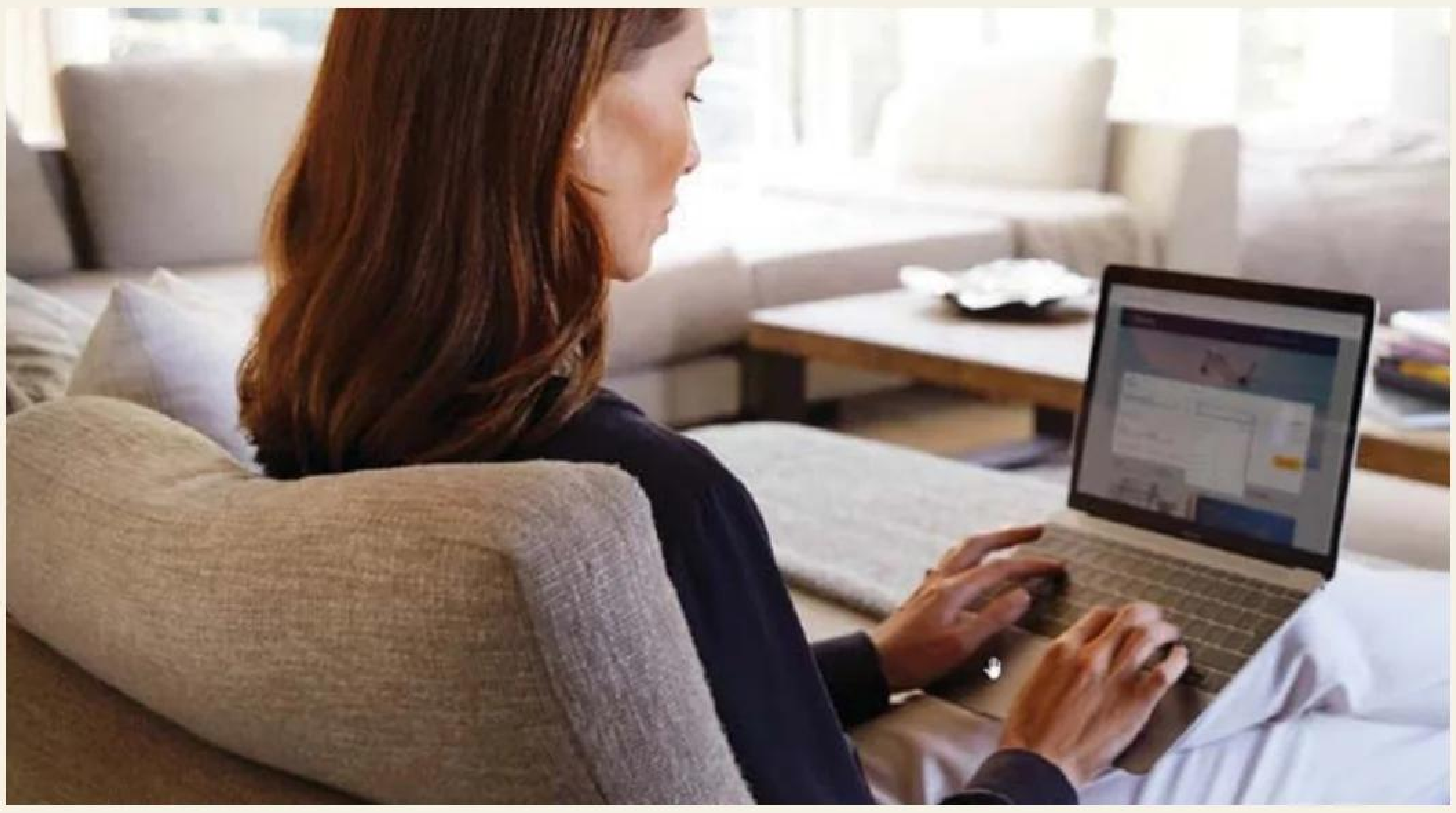
They asked industry and academia to come up with studies looking at aircraft concepts, key technologies, and designs that could offer the transformative solutions needed to secure commercial aviation's sustainable future by 2050. The agency issued five awards, worth a total of US$11.5 million, to four companies and one university.

These studies will help the agency identify and select promising aircraft concepts and technologies for further investigations.

IMAGES: SUPPLIED; GETTY IMAGES

DIRIYAH SECURES TWO NEW SUSTAINABILITY CERTIFICATIONS

DIRIYAH WAS SIMULTANEOUSLY awarded two prestigious Mostadam (Ajwad) certifications for sustainability by the Ministry of Municipalities and Housing in alignment with the kingdom's Quality of Life Program, and a central aspect of Vision 2030, during winter 2024. The mixed-use developer was recognised for its Diriyah North area (which received Masterplan certification at the Diamond Level) and the Ritz-Carlton Residences (which received Asset certification at the Gold Level) development projects respectively. The certification is granted to residential developments and communities, and is based on ratings that measure the sustainability of these projects and quality of life standards, such as increasing green spaces, providing safe pathways for pedestrians as well as cyclists, and reducing water waste by reusing it for irrigating the gardens and green areas of the project. The latest recognition follows a series of sustainability accolades recently awarded to Diriyah. Diriyah received LEED Platinum certification in 2023, for the first phase of the Diriyah Masterplan – becoming the first project in the Middle East to achieve the highest level of certification at masterplan level. Its Wadi Safar master plan also received the region's first SITES Gold precertification. Meanwhile, Diriyah's Bujairi Car Park and Samhan Car Park were also awarded Parksmart GOLD pre-certification in 2022 and 2023 respectively, for sustainability best practices.



Lufthansa Group extends Green Fares network-wide

THE GROUP LAUNCHED the Green Fares option as a pilot project in August 2022, before rolling it out across the group's European and North African routes in February 2023. They have now been extended over Lufthansa's entire global network. The fare allows passengers to purchase a ticket that includes the offsetting of their individual flight-related CO2 emissions, along with other benefits including additional status miles and a free rebooking option. The Green Fares option now includes all travel classes on more than 850,000 Lufthansa, Austrian Airlines, Brussels Airlines, SWISS, Edelweiss, Discover Airlines, and Air Dolomiti flights per year. The only exceptions are flights operated by other airlines, "individual routings in selected traffic areas of joint venture partners", and Eurowings services that already offer a PlanetBlu sustainable tariff.

DID YOU KNOW?

The **Dubai Can** initiative was first launched in February 2022, aiming to reduce single-use plastic water bottle waste in the city by encouraging individuals to use refillable water bottles, and enabling access to free and safe drinking water through the installation and use of water stations across Dubai. By 2024, the initiative had established more than 50 refill stations across the city, and encouraged 220 hotels to transition to bottle-free operations – and in doing so, prevented the use of more than 25 million single-use plastic bottles.

Air Canada to offer free wifi on-board

Air Canada plans to roll out free inflight wifi from this year, expanding its partnership with communications firm Bell – following the launch of free inflight messaging in 2023. The free service will begin on wifi-enabled aircraft within North American and "Sun" markets, and extended to long-haul routes in 2026.

RED
Radisson

Radisson RED opens first Irish property

The Radisson RED lifestyle brand has debuted in Ireland, with the unveiling of a 177-room property in the western harbour city of Galway. The hotel is housed within the Crown Square development, and has nine meeting spaces across two floors, one of which has a private bar, three boardrooms, and two breakout spaces.

Marriott invests in the outdoors

The group has acquired the Postcard Cabins brand, with 129 properties in the US, and signed an agreement with outdoor hospitality brand Trailborn (with five properties including destinations near Rocky Mountain National Park and the Grand Canyon). Marriott will also launch its own outdoor-focused collection in 2025.

Air France updates amenity kits

For long-haul first, business, and premium economy customers, the La Première leather "gift boxes" come embossed with the carrier's winged seahorse emblem, with products by Sisley including a hand cream, eye contour balm, serum, and day cream. The first class kits also contain a pen, comb, earplugs, and night mask.

Marriott
FOUR POINTS
Four Points by Sheraton Signing Ceremony

Jumeirah unveils properties in Africa

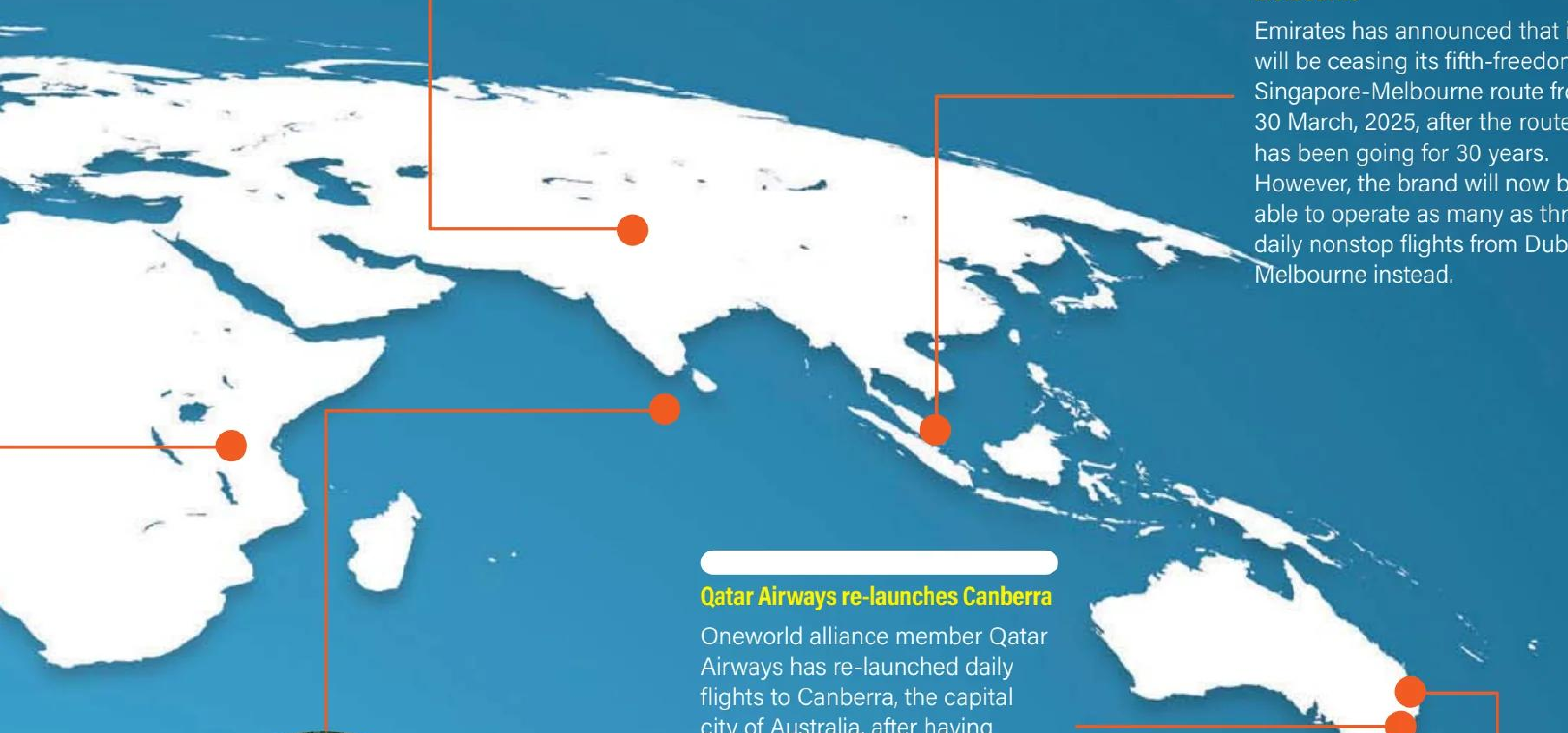
Jumeirah group, a member of Dubai Holding, has partnered with the Thanda Group to open two new properties in Africa: Jumeirah Thanda Island in Tanzania, and Jumeirah Thanda Safari in South Africa. These unique additions – an exclusive island and private safari reserve, respectively – are Jumeirah's first entry into Africa.

Air India orders key new aircraft

The order, for 100 Airbus aircraft, brings Air India's orderbook to nearly 600 jets. It includes ten A350 aircraft, and 90 A320 Family aircraft, which it said will include the A321neo. This follows orders placed in February 2023 for 470 aircraft, of which 250 were for Airbus planes, split between 210 A320neos and 40 A350s.

Emirates cancels Singapore-Melbourne

Emirates has announced that it will be ceasing its fifth-freedom Singapore-Melbourne route from 30 March, 2025, after the route has been going for 30 years. However, the brand will now be able to operate as many as three daily nonstop flights from Dubai to Melbourne instead.



Qatar Airways re-launches Canberra

Oneworld alliance member Qatar Airways has re-launched daily flights to Canberra, the capital city of Australia, after having ceased operations there during the global pandemic. They will be operated by Boeing 777-300ER aircraft, with Q-suite business class cabins and free high-speed Starlink wifi for all passengers.

Astrotourism lands in the Maldives

Sirru Fen Fushi Private Lagoon Resort brought a new kind of astrotourism to the Maldives in December, by partnering with SpaceCat Astrotourism. Guests had the chance to meet retired NASA astronaut Dominic A. Antonelli and Analog Astronaut Anisa Qureshi, sharing insider views on space, and guided stargazing sessions.

Turkish Airlines flies to Sydney

Turkish Airlines launched flights to Sydney towards the end of 2024 (on 29 November), on the airline's new Airbus A350-900 aircraft – which was designed for long-haul comfort. Operating four times a week from Istanbul via Kuala Lumpur, at 19 hours, the 9,300-mile flight path is the carrier's longest flight yet.

IMAGES: SUPPLIED; ADOBE STOCK

Rail Revival

TRAIN TRAVEL IS HEADING TOWARDS A BRIGHT NEW FUTURE, AND THE MIDDLE EAST'S RAIL SECTOR IS ON THE MOVE

WORDS YI-HWA HANNA

When the Dubai Metro first launched – on 9 September 2009 – it was big news. So big, in fact, that this was no ordinary transport system: it was an attraction in itself. Some residents across the city were quoted in the news as having ridden it with no specific destination in mind – several even taking it from end to end – simply for the novelty of being able to ride the first rapid transit train network in the GCC.

Within its first two days of operation, it had already welcomed 11,000 passengers. It had been a longtime dream – reportedly created following a vision His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, the ruler of Dubai, had during a visit to London with his father back in 1959. That vision, which came from a moment of marvelling at the driverless trains there, sparked his ambition to one day bring a world-class, sustainable transport system to his own beautiful city.

By September 2024 – when it celebrated its 15-year anniversary – it had welcomed more than 2.4 billion passengers. The world's longest driverless metro line (the Red Line was officially recognised as such by the Guinness World Records on 23 May 2011), it has grown from an initial 10 stations to 53. And on 19 December 2024, an announcement was made by Dubai's Roads and Transport Authority (RTA) stating that the Dubai Metro Blue Line Project is expected to commence operations on 9 September 2029. The project will mark a major new phase for the system that coincides with the Dubai Metro's 20th anniversary. With 14 new stations spanning 30km – and 28 new trains within its network – by 2030, the new line is expected to carry up to 200,000 riders, rising to an estimated 320,000 by 2040.

It's all part of the Dubai 2040 Master Plan – a framework that aims to transform the city into one wherein every resident can find whatever they need within 20 minutes, underlined by convenient transport that can get them wherever they need to go quickly and easily. Another key part of the plan is to double the amount of green and recreational spaces in the city, boosting the number of nature-filled areas to 60 per cent, alongside green corridors, more pedestrian- and cyclist-friendly mobility, larger public beaches, and more.

The use of mass transit and flexible means of transportation, not to mention more of those that support sustainability goals, is an essential part of it – and given what an enormous impact Dubai Metro's current Red and Green Lines have already had on the city, the new Blue Line will undeniably play a big role here.

Since its launch, the ease of transport that the rail network has provided has enabled much more choice for Dubai's residents and visitors. It didn't just cause a shift in how people got around – it also created a major cultural evolution in the way they explored, experienced, and lived in the city.

Railway has long been known as one of the safest forms of transport. It's typically efficient – and energy-efficient – and on a train, you'll never risk getting stuck in a traffic jam. Unlike a bus or a car, on a train, you can get up to stretch your legs, with more freedom to move around – especially if you're on one that has the added benefit of dining cars, sleeping cabins, and lounges, complete with decent power outlets and wifi. There's typically also a beautiful view. From Switzerland's Glacier Express to Norway's Bergen Railway, scenic train journeys aren't just a way to get from A to B – they're destinations in themselves. Trains have made up the setting of countless movies and books throughout history – and whether you're more drawn to *The Darjeeling Limited*, *The Polar Express*, or *Bullet Train* (most likely not the train on *Snowpiercer*, though), this mode of transport has long held a romantic and historical appeal.

When it comes to trains that have been made legend through literature and film, none are more iconic

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ABOVE: Dubai Metro is the first rapid transit train network in the GCC

BELOW: Rendering of the Orient Express La Dolce Vita

OPPOSITE PAGE: Rendering of the Orient Express La Dolce Vita

IMAGES: ARSENALE S.P.A.; NIKADA/GETTY IMAGES; ARSENALE S.P.A./SAUDI ARABIA RAILWAYS

ABOVE: The La Dolce Vita Orient Express will launch in 2025

IMAGE: ARSENALE SP.A

than the Orient Express. First created in 1883 by the Belgian Compagnie Internationale des Wagons-Lits, the long-distance luxury passenger train travelled all across continental Europe – extending from Paris to Istanbul, and stopping in places like Athens, Brussels, and London along the way

The train had been featured in some of the most famous fictional stories of our time, including Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express* and Ian Fleming's *From Russia With Love*, and it ran for 126 years. Then as alternative transport options began to claim their footing – such as air travel, and the creation of high-speed modern rail systems – all while the geopolitical landscape changed, the legendary train rolled to its final stop in 2009.

The train had been featured in some of the most famous fictional stories of our time

But like any good story, the legacy of the original Orient Express could never truly die. In 1982, the Venice Simplon-Orient-Express was launched. A private venture, this luxury train service ran from London to Venice and other destinations in Europe – and although it was sometimes confused with the aforementioned Orient Express, this was a separate entity. Owned by Belmond, the Venice Simplon-Orient-Express wasn't intended to be a transport solution as much as it was a destination in itself – a leisure experience complete with five-star dining, for tourists looking to enjoy a luxury train ride. Running between March and November each year, guests can still enjoy its beautiful sleeper and restaurant carriages while passing through destinations including Geneva, Prague, Vienna, Budapest, Istanbul, Bucharest, and Sinaia, with sightseeing opportunities along the way. From time to time, these destinations will change by season, and over the years, it has occasionally incorporated additional stops in places like Switzerland, Germany, Slovakia, Poland, Scandinavia, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Italy.

During the past few years, a couple more options have come up: An ÖBB NightJet has been running the Paris-Vienna route three times a week since December 2021, and in 2025, Accor will be launching its very own Orient Express from Paris to Istanbul. To use the name, the French hospitality company purchased a 50 per cent stake in the Orient Express brand from SNCF, and since 2018, it has been renovating 17 CIWL carriages from the now-defunct Nostalgie Istanbul Orient Express for this new iteration. With the cars originally dating back to the 1920s and 1930s, it's a beautiful way of paying homage to the original train while elevating it to appeal to a modern audience.

Accor's new Orient Express will operate two services: one across Central Europe (covering France, Germany, Austria, Hungary, and Czechia), and one that travels the original mythic route (covering France, Germany, Austria, Hungary, Romania, Buglaria, and Türkiye). Its inaugural journey is scheduled to take place on 4 April 2025.

Among Accor's new vision for this paragon of "slow travel" is a return to Italy through their La Dolce Vita Orient Express. After a presale that took place in 2022 (wherein 400 of its cabins were quickly snapped up for its maiden voyage) – for an initially-planned launch in 2023, then moved to 2024 – this highly-anticipated train journey officially opened for reservations in August 2024, before it will finally travel in spring 2025.

Developed by Arsenale Group – an Italian company that develops and manages luxury hospitality and lifestyle assets – and conceived by architecture and design firm Dimorestudio, the train feels proudly Italian in many ways. The six trains are decked out with interiors inspired by 20th century Italian design. On the inside, it has 12 deluxe cabins, 18 suites, and one grand La Dolce Vita Suite. All of them have en-suite bathrooms, and across its carriages, the train also boasts a restaurant, a lounge, and a sophisticated bar, with each train able to accommodate up to 62 guests in total. It can also be booked out for private occasions, such as weddings or corporate events.

It's not just Europe that's getting a new luxury train this year, though – Arsenale Group has also partnered with Saudi Arabia Railways to create the Dream of the Desert, the first-ever luxury cruise rail project in Saudi Arabia. Also scheduled to launch sometime in 2025, this beautiful train will consist of 41 luxurious cabins across 15 cars, a fine dining restaurant and lounge bar, and additional high-end services. It will travel around

55022
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Etihad Rail

1290km from Riyadh across to Saudi Arabia's border with Jordan, passing through stunning desert landscapes, UNESCO World Heritage sites filled with ancient archeological treasures, and lush nature reserves. For the Dream of the Desert, Arsenale has promised design features that are inspired by Saudi heritage.

In the meantime, those who are seeking a taste of historical train journeys can visit the remains of the Hejaz Railway – an historic railway that was the very first in Arabia, constructed during the Ottoman Empire and once having run from Damascus to Madinah. In more recent developments, Saudi Arabia Railways opened the Haramain High Speed Railway in October 2018, linking the Muslim holy cities of Madinah and Makkah through a route between King Abdullah Economic City and Jeddah. It travels across 449.2km at 300km/h with five stations along the way, with a 3.75km branch line linking it to Jeddah's King Abdulaziz International Airport. At its stations, passengers will find beautiful designs created by award-winning architecture firm Foster + Partners and British engineering firm Buro Happold, with shops, restaurants, mosques, VIP lounges, and even a helipad.

Saudi recently continued to bet on train travel as part of its future, with The Royal Commission for AlUla having come into a partnership with Saudi Railway Polytechnic during winter 2024. Together, they'll work on boosting opportunities for young Saudis looking to launch a career in AlUla and/or the kingdom's rapidly-growing rail sector. The first stage of the agreement is planned to provide vocational training programmes in railway maintenance and operation that will build sector-specific subjects, such as rolling stock and infrastructure through hands-on training.

Another train service that's on its way to make a historic impact in the Middle East is Etihad's Rail passenger train. Etihad Rail has already been running for some time now, having first been established back in 2009, but until recently, it has only been used for freight purposes.

The passenger train will connect all seven emirates of the UAE, and is anticipated to carry 36.5 million passengers per year by 2030. The locations of its first stations have already been announced, beginning with one in Sakamkam, Fujairah, and the second near Sharjah's University City. It will run across 900km in total, with 400 cars, travelling at 200km/h; getting people from Dubai to Abu Dhabi within 57 minutes, Abu Dhabi to Al Ain within 70 minutes, and Abu Dhabi to Fujairah within 105 minutes. In March 2024, it conducted its first passenger service trial run.

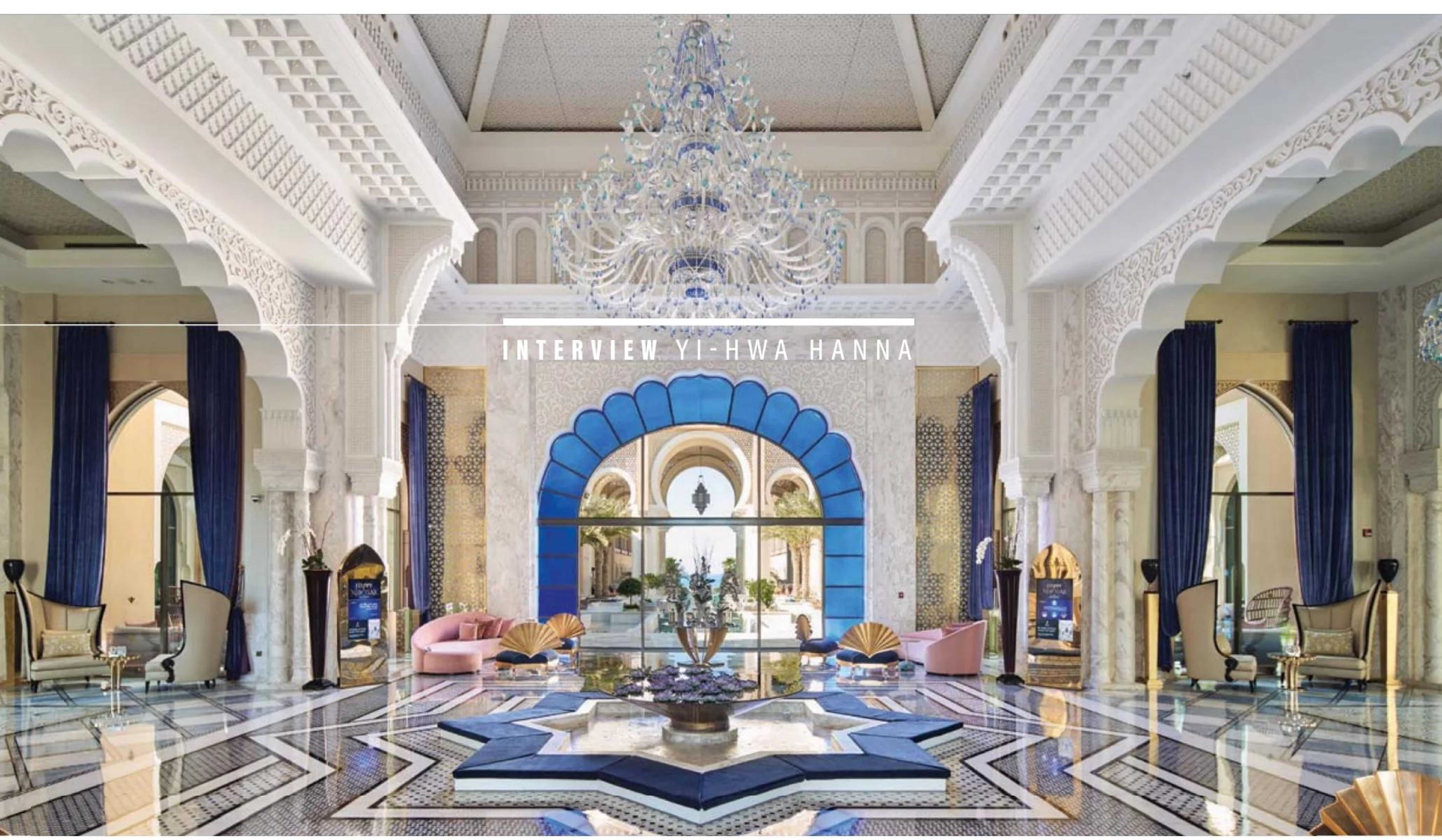
Eventually, it will also be connected with Oman's Etihad Rail network, with future travel times between Abu Dhabi and Sohar estimated to take just an hour and 40 minutes. Etihad Rail's passengers trains will reportedly offer its guests plenty of ways to stay comfortable and entertained, from infotainment systems to charging stations, food and beverages, and more. The experience is rumoured to be no less glamorous than the ideals of the Orient Express, with Etihad Rail also having signed a contract with Arsenale Group for its creation.

From Europe to the Middle East – and everywhere in between – it's clear that train travel is about to make a comeback. And with the perfect blend of nostalgia, cutting-edge innovation, and technology-fuelled comfort supported by vintage design, we're eagerly along for the ride. BT

ABOVE: Etihad Rail's passenger train is anticipated to be able to carry 36.5 million passengers per year by 2030

BOTTOM: Launched in 2018, the Haramain High Speed Railway connects the holy cities of Madinah and Makkah

IMAGES: ETIHAD RAIL; SAUDI ARABIA RAILWAYS



INTERVIEW YI-HWA HANNA

All in the details

Rixos's unique concept offers distinct appeal in an overtly switched-on world: a sense of freedom, through experience-led stays that make everyone feel like royalty. **Ali Ozbay**, Vice President of Marketing & Communications for ALL Inclusive Collection and Rixos Hotels, explains the brand's ethos

Rixos is a brand synonymous with luxury and style. What do these words mean to you?

For me, luxury is more than just plush fabrics and high-end finishes – it's about crafting experiences that feel exceptional at every turn. It's that "wow" moment when you step into a room with a view that takes your breath away, or when the scent of freshly -brewed coffee fills the air before you even have to ask. Style, on the other hand, is our signature mark. It's bold, it's elegant, and it's ever so slightly playful, like a good conversation with a friend who knows how to keep things interesting.

What is the hallmark of your all-inclusive, all-exclusive concept?

Our all-inclusive, all-exclusive concept isn't just about "everything is included" – it's about offering an experience where guests feel like the world is their oyster, and we've made it easy for them to enjoy at a price point they are happy to pay. Think of it as a VIP pass to everything you could ever want, without ever worrying about the bill. Want to sip a cocktail while watching a sunset? Done. Enjoy a seven-course meal while a live band serenades you? Done. It's freedom with finesse, where every detail is taken care of, so you can simply be in the moment, with no strings attached.

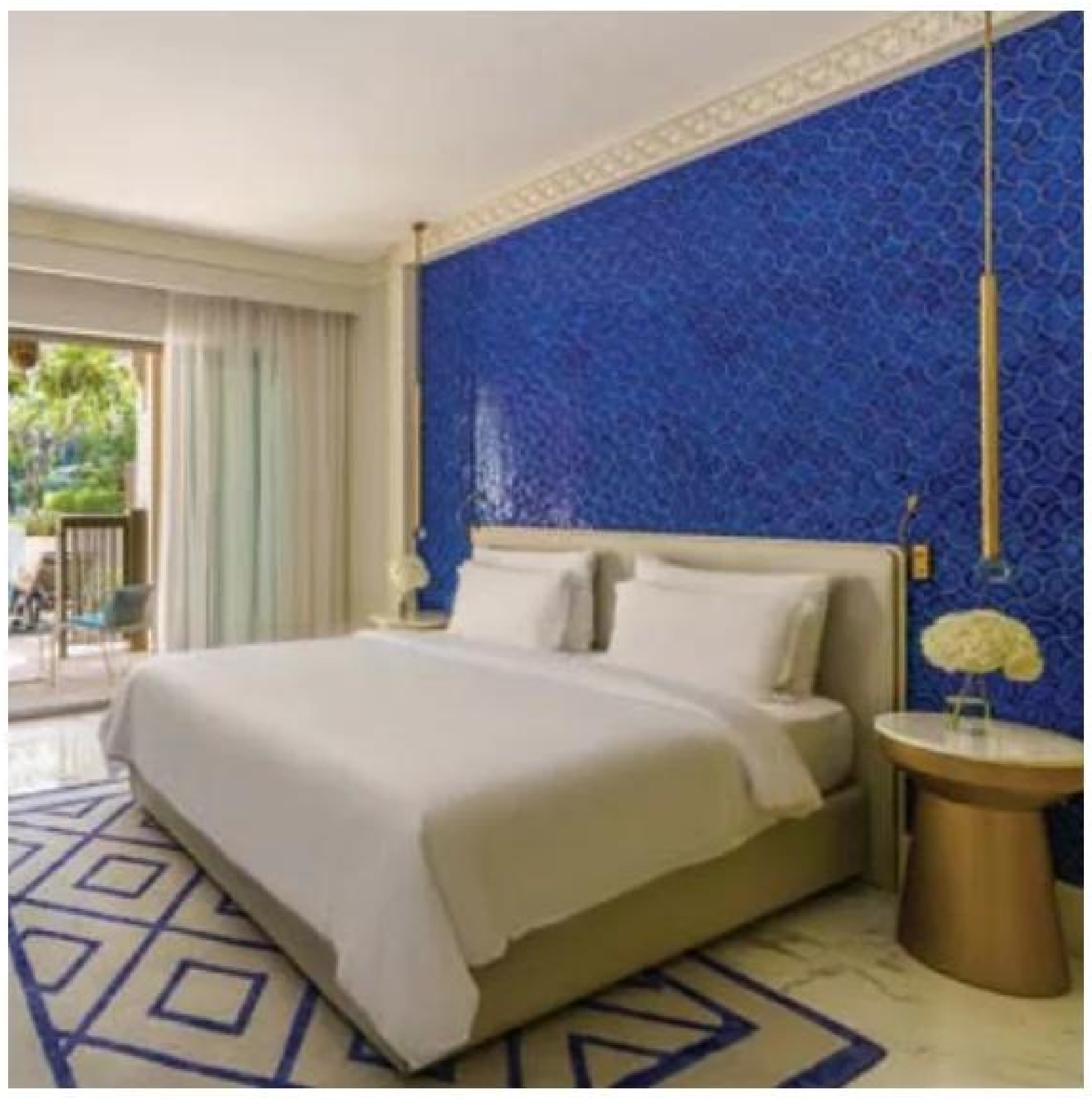
How does Rixos typically incorporate its Turkish heritage into its properties?

We infuse our Turkish heritage into every corner, but not in the way you might expect. It's less about cliché references and more about creating an experience that feels distinctly Turkish – generous, welcoming, and rich with stories. From the traditional Turkish hammam – where relaxation meets ancient rituals – to the cuisine that invites guests to taste a slice of Türkiye's rich culinary history, it's about bringing the essence of Türkiye into each stay. It's not about re-creating the past, but about celebrating it with a modern twist that feels familiar and yet new – like the best kind of homecoming.

What were some of the highlights of 2024 for Rixos within the region?
2024 has been nothing short of extraordinary for Rixos in the region –it's been a year of bold moves, unforgettable milestones, and a lot of celebratory toasts! From the grand openings of stunning new properties that redefined luxury and hospitality to hosting world-class events that brought communities together, every moment was a highlight in its own right. We elevated guest experiences with new wellness initiatives, unique kids "edutainment" activities, dazzling entertainment, and immersive culinary journeys, proving that "all-inclusive, all-exclusive" isn't just a concept – it's a lifestyle. But perhaps the brightest highlight has been the connections we've made: welcoming new guests, delighting returning ones, and continuing to build a legacy of unforgettable memories across the region. 2024 was all about raising the bar – and we're only getting started.

You had some impressive partnerships in 2024, including one with the Al Jalila Foundation, and another with the NBA Abu Dhabi Games. How do you choose your partners - and what's the creative process behind these ventures?
Partnerships, for us, are about finding the perfect synergy – aligning with brands and organisations that share our values, elevate guest experiences, and bring something truly unique to the table. The creative process? It's where the magic happens. We start with a simple question: What would make this unforgettable? From there, it's about storytelling, curating experiences that not only wow but also connect – whether it's cheering courtside at a world-class game or standing together for a cause that matters. We don't settle for "just another collaboration." Every partnership we dream up is designed to surprise, inspire, and leave a lasting impression – because that's the Rixos way.

In 2024, five Rixos hotels received Certified Autism Center accreditation. Why is inclusivity such an important aspect of good hospitality?
Inclusivity isn't just an aspect of good hospitality – it's the very foundation of it. True hospitality means making everyone feel welcome, understood, and valued. It's about creating spaces where no one feels like an afterthought, and every guest – regardless of their needs – can relax, connect, and enjoy moments that matter. In today's world, inclusivity isn't optional; it's essential. Guests are looking for more than just luxury; they're seeking experiences that resonate with empathy and care. Receiving the Certified Autism Center accreditation for five of our Rixos hotels in 2024 wasn't just a milestone – it was a statement. It reflects our belief that hospitality should leave no one behind, and that thoughtful, meaningful service is what truly sets exceptional hotels apart. At Rixos, inclusivity is how we turn "welcome" into "you belong here." Because that's what great hospitality is all about.



FROM TOP: One bedroom suite at Rixos Saadiyat Island; Rixos Tersane Istanbul

OPPOSITE PAGE: Lobby at Rixos Saadiyat Island

One major project announced in 2024 was the Rixos Hotels and Residences, to be launched by 2026. Why do you think branded residences are becoming so appealing nowadays?
Branded residences are the ultimate blend of "home sweet home" and "five-star living" – a perfect marriage of comfort and curated luxury. In a world where time is the new currency, people crave seamless, stress-free lifestyles with all the perks of a luxury hotel at their doorstep. It's not just about owning a space; it's about owning an experience – and that's what makes it so irresistible.

Rixos Bab Al Bahr achieved FEE Blue Flag certification in 2024. What is your philosophy when it comes to sustainability?
Sustainability isn't just a trend; it's a responsibility woven into everything we do. Achieving the FEE Blue Flag certification at Rixos Bab Al Bahr in 2024 was a proud moment, but it's also a reflection of our broader philosophy: luxury and sustainability can – and should – go hand in hand. We believe that taking care of our guests also means taking care of the environment they're here to enjoy. From pristine beaches and clear waters to eco-conscious practices behind the scenes, we're committed to preserving the beauty of our surroundings for generations to come.

Sustainability, for us, is about balance – creating extraordinary experiences today while protecting tomorrow. Whether it's reducing our footprint, embracing local initiatives, or fostering awareness, we strive to set a standard where indulgence feels good and does good. After all, a view is only as beautiful as the care we take to protect it.

What can we look forward to from Rixos Hotels for 2025?
If 2024 was extraordinary, 2025 is set to be a showstopper. You can expect more stunning openings, innovative partnerships, and experiences that continue to redefine all-inclusive, all-exclusive luxury. We're talking elevated dining, next-level entertainment, and wellness offerings that truly nurture the mind, body, and soul.

But beyond that, we're doubling down on what makes Rixos special – creating meaningful connections, pushing boundaries, and ensuring every stay feels unforgettable. Trust me, 2025 will be one for the books, and we can't wait to share what's next. Stay tuned – there's so much more to come! BT

IMAGE: RIXOS HOTELS

Best of both worlds

Extended stay properties and "hotels in residence" are redefining the concept of a home away from home – and **Ascott** remains a front-runner

With the global extended stay hotel market expected to grow at a CAGR of 9.4 per cent from 2024 to 2030, it's going from strength to strength – a fact that Vincent Miccolis, Ascott's managing director of the Middle East, Africa, Turkey, and India affirms. Founded in 1984, the company has long been a leader in the long-stay space.

"It's a reflection of evolving global travel patterns and shifting consumer preferences," Miccolis explains. One factor driving this trend is the rise of remote and hybrid working models, which have expanded the need for flexible accommodation options that combine the comforts of home with the convenience of a hotel. "Travellers today, whether corporate guests, digital nomads, or relocating families, value spaces where they can live, work, and relax for extended periods without feeling transient," he says.

Affordability is another factor: "Long-stay accommodations often provide better value for money compared to traditional hotels, particularly for stays exceeding a week or more. This cost efficiency, paired with tailored amenities like fully equipped kitchens, laundry facilities, and community spaces, enhances their appeal," Miccolis says. "At Ascott, we've embraced this shift, continuously innovating to meet the needs of the extended-stay segment. Our serviced residences and long-stay-focused brands, such as Ascott, Oakwood, Somerset, Citadines, and lyf, are designed to create spaces that cater to diverse lifestyles. Our properties prioritise not just functionality, but also a sense of belonging and community," he adds.

One of Ascott's greatest strengths is the flexibility that it offers between the short and long-stay options. Miccolis describes its renowned flex-hybrid accommodation model as a cornerstone of the company's ability to adapt to the evolving needs of travellers. "It's designed to seamlessly integrate short-stay and long-stay options within the same property, giving us the flexibility to cater to diverse guest profiles, from business travellers on a brief trip to families relocating for months," he says.

This model allows Ascott to maximise properties' potential by tailoring spaces and services to meet varying demands. For instance, a business traveller staying for a few nights can enjoy hotel-like services, while a long-stay guest benefits from the comforts of a fully equipped serviced residence, including features like a kitchenette, dedicated living areas, and laundry facilities. What truly sets Ascott apart, Miccolis says, is its ability to scale services and amenities based on guest preferences and length of stay. "This ensures a highly personalised experience, whether someone needs a short, hassle-free stay or a long-term, home-like environment," he says. It also supports operational efficiency – and with the company having been committed to this concept for 40 years already, they have a strategic advantage.

Like many other markets across the globe, the "hotel-in-residence" option has been growing in appeal within the region – and this heightened interest in long-stay offerings is being fuelled by the MENA region's economic and geographical position, as well as cultural preferences. Strategic investment in infrastructure and global events, too, have driven up demand for adaptable accommodations. "The Middle East is a hub for business, tourism, and relocation, attracting a diverse range of travellers, from expatriates and corporate professionals to families and tourists. [Meanwhile], many travellers in the region value spacious accommodations that can cater to families, along with amenities like kitchens and private living areas," Miccolis says. He explains that the "hotel-in-residence" model appeals to this audience by offering the flexibility of extended stays, fully equipped living spaces, and hotel-like services, ensuring comfort for both short-term and long-term guests. "It provides a home-like environment without sacrificing the convenience and luxury of hotel services," he adds.

As the company aims to expand its portfolio globally – with the Middle East playing a key role in its growth – 2025 is set to be a milestone year for Ascott. "We're targeting 10,000 units in the region by 2025, with 5,500 new units planned across the UAE and KSA," Miccolis says. He explains that the region's dynamic evolution cements its role as a cornerstone of Ascott's global expansion strategy.

"Our focus includes strengthening our presence with flagship brands like Ascott, Somerset, and Citadines, while introducing new lifestyle and luxury concepts such as lyf, The Crest Collection, and Oakwood. We're also expanding into new markets like Kuwait and growing in existing ones, including Oman and Bahrain, while exploring opportunities in Africa and Türkiye," Miccolis says. "2025 is also set to be a year of openings, with exciting new properties set to open in new markets such as Casablanca and Lagos, while we are solidifying our presence in Riyadh and Istanbul," he adds.

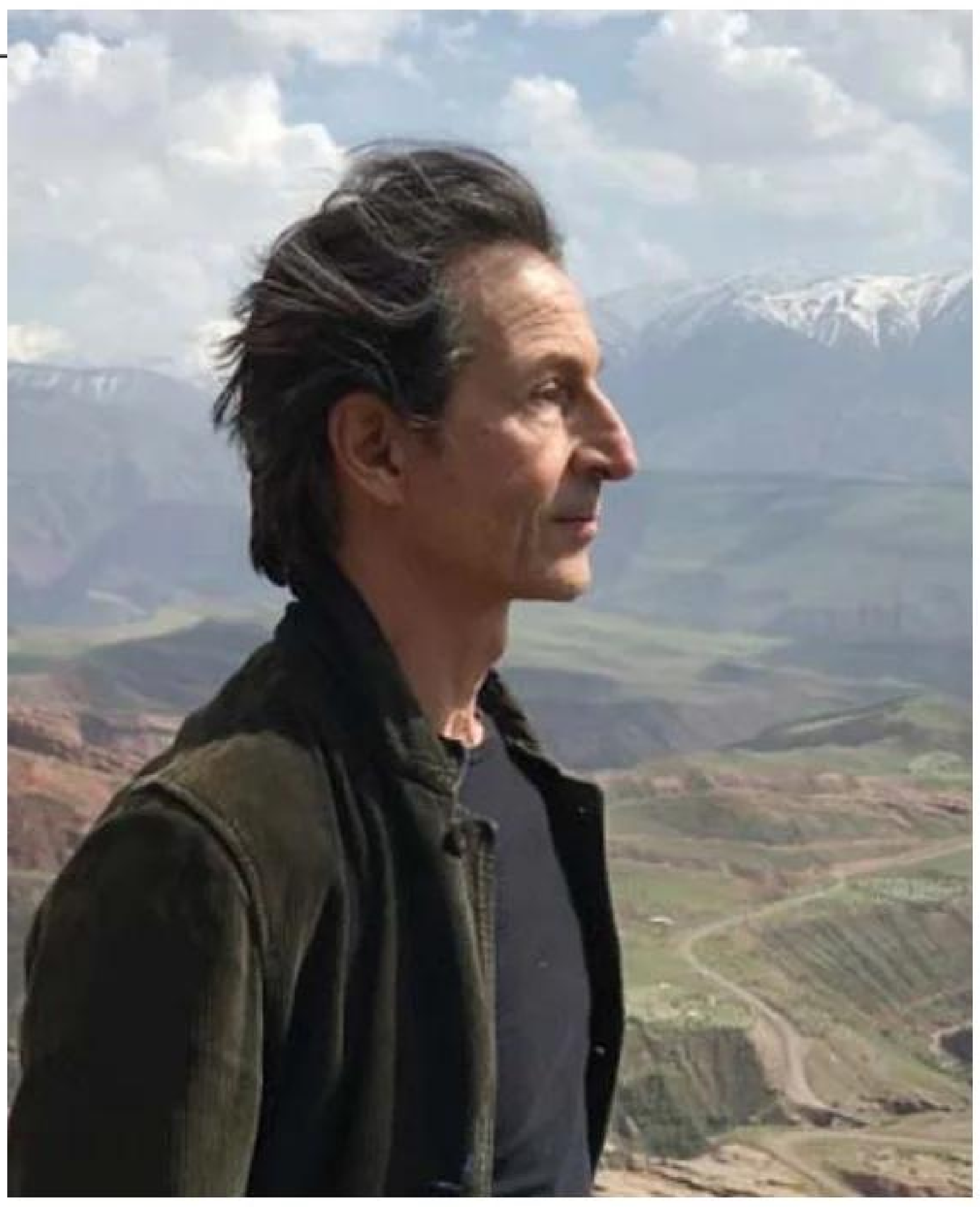
With the flex-hybrid model being a notable trend shaping the industry – as Miccolis puts it, "where 'longer stays are becoming shorter, while shorter stays are becoming longer,'" hospitality brands offering versatile accommodation that can meet the needs of both short and extended stay travellers – like Ascott – are sure to come out on top. BT

AIR MILES WITH

Anthony Sattin

Author, Journalist, Broadcaster, and Travel Writer

INTERVIEW YI-HWA HANNA



What drives your passion for your work? When I was a student, I knew I wanted to write, but I wasn't sure in what genre. After university, I spent a few years writing in a variety of ways – I even wrote songs for a musical (it never reached the stage) and wrote some new *Winnie the Pooh* stories for Disney! I was also writing short stories, and that felt good, and from that I wrote some longer fiction. But I have never wanted to be constrained by any one genre. History was always a passion and travel became one. I have written history novels, biographies, a travel book… but in the end, everything I write is a story and I think of myself not as an historian, or biographer, or travel writer, but as a storyteller.

Your main area of interest is the Middle East. Why is this so? I first visited the Middle East in my late teens – it was winter and I wanted to go somewhere warm, and different, but what I found was more than just sunshine. I was fascinated by the history, and I loved the new regional connections, the sense of community, and the landscapes. I still am fascinated by it. With each book I have written on the region, I think 'This will be the last one', and then something else catches my imagination. I have just started another book about Egypt.

Your latest book, *Nomads*, was named *The Sunday Times*'s Best History Book of the Year. What's the greatest lesson you've learned from studying ancient nomadic lifestyles? In an unexpected way, writing *Nomads* became part of my protest against Brexit, because having spent years reading about the rise and fall of empires and countries around the world and across the globe, the one thing that became abundantly clear was that we all benefit when we have open borders, freedom of movement and of conscience. Protectionism doesn't work. And no matter how high a fence or wall you build, people will always find a way around it if they need to – the Chinese learned this when nomads got around their Great Wall, and so did the Romans when they built walls to keep out nomad tribes on their eastern frontier. We all benefit from the cross-fertilisation of people. Together we are stronger.

You'll be at the Emirates Airline Festival of Literature this month. What do you love about the UAE? I have been visiting the UAE for decades. I was in Dubai when the Burj Al Arab was completed, but before it opened to the public. I was taken around the hotel by a very proud general manager. And I was in Abu Dhabi making a programme for the BBC about the cultural district when the site where the Louvre now sits was still nothing but water. I love the scale of ambition in the UAE; the pushing at the boundaries of what is possible.

How would you describe the Middle East's growth over the past few decades? In Europe we watch with some envy as the Middle East evolves. The wealth generated from natural resources has fuelled the sort of boom that Europe enjoyed in the 19th century with revenues generated from its empires. But that wealth is being harnessed to some very ambitious visions. I remember a story that HE Zaki Nussebeih told me about watching the Apollo moon landing in 1969 with HE Sheikh Zayed. Some people in the room suspected that they were watching something out of Hollywood, but Sheikh Zayed understood how the West had advanced and determined that his people should try to emulate that.

Any favourite regional dishes? I love it all! From mezze to Egyptian molokhiyya, to a lamb roasted in the sand.

If you could travel back in time to any specific place, when and where would you go? I wrote a book about Florence Nightingale and the novelist Gustave Flaubert travelling on the Nile in 1849, and I think that is a place and a time I wish I could have experienced. Most of the sites we see today were available to them, hieroglyphs had been deciphered (Nightingale learned to read them on the journey down from England), and the first guidebook had just been published, but there were very few visitors.

What's the first thing you do at a new destination? I always go for a walk whenever I arrive somewhere new, or old. You can drive around a place for hours and never get a handle on it. But on the street, you feel the heat or cold, you smell the place, and you meet people. Occasionally it can be a problem. When I first went to China, there was always the risk of straying too far and not being able to find my way back to the hotel or somewhere I knew, nor of finding anyone who could speak a word of any language I spoke.

What are three things that you always pack? I always have a book – in the days when I wrote a weekly book column for *The Sunday Times*, I used to travel with a bagful of books, which I shed as I went along. Now I try to travel lighter, with just one book. I always have a notebook and pen, and I also always pack earplugs.

What is your go-to choice of in-flight entertainment? I prefer to read on a plane, but if that's not possible, I listen to an audiobook or a podcast.

What's your ultimate bucket list destination and why? I have spent at least half of each year away for most of my adult life, and although there are places I have still not visited – Mexico and Japan are high on my wish list – I tend to go back to places. I like the accumulation of experiences in a place, how I get to know people, find my favourite café or restaurant… BT

IMAGE: SUPPLIED

The future of sports tourism: Horse racing as a key component

Sports can be a major win for tourism – and Dubai's horse racing scene isn't just a pioneer in the field, it's also a key component in Dubai's Vision 2030

HIS EXCELLENCY ALI AL ALI
BOARD MEMBER & CEO, DUBAI RACING CLUB

For the whole of my life growing up in Dubai, horse racing has been a key component of the culture in the UAE.

The sport has its roots in the region due to a centuries-old affiliation with equestrianism, while horse racing took a gargantuan leap forward in the early 1990s. It was in 1992 that His Highness Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice President and Prime Minister of the UAE and Ruler of Dubai, outlined his strategy to open a global racing stable and to use it to promote the Emirates.

Many said it couldn't be done – that Thoroughbreds needed grass, not desert – but His Highness proved that the word "impossible" does not belong in the UAE's dictionary. More than 30 years later, his Godolphin stable has celebrated more than 8000 winners on four continents. Furthermore, with their royal blue silks emblazoned with Emirates branding, they have provided a huge role in marketing Dubai to the world.

The spotlight of the sporting arena was cast even more firmly on Dubai in 1996 when the first Dubai World Cup, hosted at at Nad Al Sheba Racecourse, was won by the American-trained horse Cigar. Nearly 30 years on, the renowned race has moved to the spectacular Meydan Racecourse and been won by horses trained in the UK, USA, France, Japan, and the UAE – it is the most global race meeting in the world.

The Dubai World Cup is also one of the biggest and most spectacular social occasions in Dubai and attracts thousands of overseas visitors, who come for the glamour as much as for the racing. We have been cognisant of this in continuing to develop the visual spectacle of the event; in 2024 we broke three Guinness World Records for our innovative use of drones. Our goal is to enhance Dubai's position as a leading entertainment destination, with horse racing at its core.

Where one sport starts, others follow, and golf, tennis, water sports, rugby, and swimming, among others, are all regularly contested at the top level across the UAE. In addition, the country has become a popular winter training base for many of the world's top international teams and individuals. This has played a huge part in developing Dubai as a tourist destination and, in turn, fuelling the economy.

IMAGE: DUBAI RACING CLUB

You only have to look at Dubai's stunning architecture and spend a small amount of time here to know that we are in a city which does not stop when it comes to technological advancements and we in the sports and entertainment industries will not stop either. We are striving to use technology to enhance the visitor experience and to make horse racing more accessible and appealing to younger generations. This is especially significant as the UAE enters a new era of Esport Gaming. We are also working to introduce AI modules for both facility management and training. If we can attract a new wave of fans into the sport, those who are engaged digitally, then the future is extremely bright.

While Dubai is the leader, other Emirates and several other Middle Eastern countries have now joined us on the journey and have vastly enhanced their racing product in recent years. Working alongside these jurisdictions, we are continuously strengthening our regional partnerships to make Dubai a hub. From here, horses can take advantage of perfect conditions, state-of-the-art facilities, and outstanding infrastructure from which to compete at the top level all over the Gulf.

With these interlinked strategies, we will continue to fulfil the vision of His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum and Dubai 2030: to make Dubai the world's leading international horse racing destination. BT

Elevating professional success through cognitive health

When it comes to your career, learning how to master mind over matter – and developing true cognitive health – can give your life a major boost

DR. ZEMER WANG
MEDICAL DIRECTOR, THE BRAIN & PERFORMANCE CENTRE, A DP WORLD COMPANY

In today's fast-paced professional world, the demand for mental agility and cognitive resilience has never been higher. Whether navigating complex business decisions, engaging in creative problem-solving, or managing a team, your cognitive health is the cornerstone of your professional success and personal well-being. Yet cognitive health often remains an overlooked aspect of our overall health strategy. It's time we give it the attention it deserves.

Why Cognitive Health Matters

Cognitive health encompasses thinking clearly, learning new information, conducting your actions logically, and recalling past experiences and details. It influences our productivity, creativity, and emotional well-being. For professionals, maintaining optimal cognitive health is crucial. It enhances our ability to focus, make informed decisions, and adapt to new challenges. Neglecting cognitive health due to increased stress and unhealthy lifestyle can lead to decreased performance and long-term health issues such as depression, cognitive decline, and eventually, dementia.

Paying Attention to Cognitive Health

Professionals need to integrate strategies into their daily routines and lifestyle choices to prioritise cognitive health.

1. **Mental Stimulation:** Engage in activities that challenge your brain. This could include puzzles, learning a new language, or pursuing a hobby that requires strategic thinking. Continuous learning stimulates neural connections and keeps the brain sharp.
2. **Physical Exercise:** Regular physical activity improves blood flow to the brain, reducing the risk of cognitive decline. Exercise also promotes the release of chemicals that enhance brain health and stimulate the growth of new brain cells.
3. **Healthy Diet:** A balanced diet rich in antioxidants, non-saturated fats, vitamins, and minerals provides essential nutrients that protect the brain. Berries, nuts, leafy greens, and fish are particularly beneficial.
4. **Quality Sleep:** Sleep is critical for cognitive function. It is during sleep that the brain consolidates memories and clears out toxins. Aim for seven to nine hours of quality sleep per night.
5. **Stress Management:** Chronic stress can impair cognitive functions. Utilising certain techniques such as mindfulness, meditation, and deep-breathing exercises can help manage stress and improve mental clarity.
6. **Social Interaction:** Engaging with others stimulates brain regions involved in social cognition and emotional regulation. Maintaining strong social connections is linked to better cognitive health and longevity.

> Cognitive health is the cornerstone of your professional success and personal well-being

Innovative Approaches: Hyperbaric Oxygen Therapy (HBOT)

One groundbreaking approach to enhancing cognitive health is Hyperbaric Oxygen Therapy. We have seen remarkable improvements in cognitive function through HBOT programmes, particularly for individuals recovering from brain injuries or dealing with age-related cognitive decline.

HBOT involves breathing pure oxygen in a pressurised chamber. This process boosts the oxygen levels in the blood and tissues. The extra oxygen helps the brain create new connections, reduces inflammation, and encourages the body to repair itself by releasing stem cells.

Our HBOT program, combined with diet, and cognitive and physical training, has substantially improved cognitive functions in domains such as: memory, attention, and executive functions. Professionals who undergo this therapy report enhanced mental clarity, better decision-making abilities, and an overall boost in productivity.

The Impact on Health, Career, and Life

Investing in cognitive health can profoundly impact every aspect of life. For professionals, it translates to sharper focus, quicker problem-solving skills, and more innovative thinking – qualities that are highly valued in any industry. Improved cognitive health also means better stress management and emotional regulation, leading to a more balanced and fulfilling personal life.

In the long term, maintaining good cognitive health can reduce the risk of some neurodegenerative diseases, and plays a major role in enhancing the quality of life well into old age. It's not just about extending lifespan but improving healthspan – the number of years we live in good health.

IMAGE: THE BRAIN & PERFORMANCE CENTRE

THE ELEVATOR PITCH

Business Traveller Middle East gives **Karim Abdelhamid**, general manager of Sofitel Al Hamra Beach Resort, five minutes to pitch his property to prospective guests

"At Sofitel Al Hamra Beach Resort, French art de vivre beautifully merges with Arabian charm in the tranquil Al Hamra Village of Ras Al Khaimah. With over 25 years of experience in leading luxury hospitality globally, I am excited to introduce a destination that truly redefines luxury, offering a unique retreat for those seeking an unparalleled escape.

Our resort features 292 elegant rooms and suites equipped with exquisite Diptyque amenities, bringing Parisian elegance to every aspect of your stay. Guests can relax in environments that blend refined French design with local cultural influences, ensuring a luxurious and comfortable stay. Our suites elevate the experience, boasting private pools for an exclusive and serene ambience. Each suite also provides exclusive access to Club Millésime, which includes personalised concierge services, butler service, complimentary breakfast, afternoon tea, happy hour, and priority check-in and check-out.

Dining at Sofitel Al Hamra is a testament to our commitment to culinary excellence, with seven world-class dining outlets that promise an unforgettable gastronomic journey. From the refined French cuisine at Citron and the vibrant Polynesian flavours at Waka, to the refined French culinary experience at Réunion and the extensive wine collection at Veritas, each venue delights the senses and offers impeccable service.

Enhancing the indulgent experience is our Sofitel Spa with Clarins – the first of its kind in the region, blending Sofitel's sophistication with Clarins' expertise in natural ingredients and advanced skincare. The spa provides a luxurious retreat with private treatment rooms, a serene spa pool, and a rejuvenating spa bath. Alongside these spa amenities, our resort features four beachfront swimming pools to enhance your relaxation: the longest lagoon pool in the region, an adults-only Serenity Pool for tranquil moments, a family-friendly Oasis Pool for shared fun, and a vibrant Splash & Slide Zone for children.

To further personalise the guest experience, our exclusive Club Millésime and the Accor Live Limitless (ALL) lifestyle loyalty programme ensure that every visit is uniquely tailored and memorable.

For our younger guests, Le Petit Kids Club and Teens Club offer a range of activities and adventures, ensuring that family members of all ages have a memorable stay. We also pride ourselves on being a pet-friendly resort, offering specialised amenities and services that ensure every family member – including furry ones – enjoys luxurious accommodation.

Guests can also enjoy exclusive moments at our private beach or golf at the nearby Al Hamra Golf Club, enhancing their stay with leisure and recreation.

At Sofitel Al Hamra Beach Resort, we are dedicated to redefining hospitality through operational excellence and an unwavering commitment to guest satisfaction. Whether you're visiting for leisure, attending an event, or seeking a peaceful retreat, we strive to provide an experience that exceeds all expectations.

IMAGES: SOFITEL AL HAMRA BEACH RESORT

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WORDS HANNAH BRANDLER

Let's talk LOUNGES

Airline lounges are utilising art, design, food and wellness to offer a premium space to all travellers

JUSTIN PIPERGER; MATTHEW MCNULTY, CORGAN; VIRGINIE VALDOIRS/AIR FRANCE

It's just gone 5.15am when I enter the BA Galleries Club Lounge at London Heathrow T5. Autopilot kicks in and I make a beeline for the coffee machine and pastry corner to revive my zombie-like self before my flight. Neighbouring passengers have different priorities, toasting the start of their holiday with a glass of bubbly, getting ahead with emails, or snoozing on reclined chairs.

"Catering to all those different audiences is something you've got to be mindful of when developing a lounge proposition," explained Shaun Weston, just a few weeks into his new role as SVP, guest experience and operations/chief operations officer at the Collinson-owned Airport Dimensions – whose portfolio includes 65 airport lounges and experiences around the world.

Well-placed charging ports, suitable workspaces, decent coffee, and quiet zones should instinctively be incorporated into the design. "It's part of your housekeeping. You pivot around these fundamentals and build out from there," adds Weston. Today's focus lies on elevating the existing offering.

Herein lies the power of the 21st-century airport lounge, which has transformed from a soulless stopover into an exciting destination packed with entertainment, dining and wellness experiences – all the while maintaining the essential requirements for business travel.

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Plaza Premium's 'Art and Lounge' series at London Heathrow; Air France's lounge at LAX; The Club SFO in San Francisco

DESTINATION DESIGN

One way to jazz up a lounge space is through design. Long gone are the days of stale, carbon-copy waiting rooms scattered across the world. Today's lounges feature characterful artwork and local design cues.

"Weaving that sense of place into your fundamentals is important," says Weston. Take, for example, The Club SFO that opened in June 2024 within San Francisco International Airport's Harvey Milk Terminal 1. Seeking to tie the interiors to the local California landscape, the lounge features a mural depicting a panoramic view of the Redwood Forest, a tree canopy ceiling and a fireplace that gives the illusion of a campfire setting thanks to water vapour and lighting effects.

One of the biggest openings last year was the Delta One lounge at New York JFK's Terminal 4, which features nods to the Big Apple throughout. A gold leaf ceiling and chandeliers above the bar are inspired by Radio City Music Hall, while a penny-round ceiling at the Market and Bakery is a take on the original Eero Saarinen-designed JFK terminal. This facility also marks the launch of the airline's new premium lounge concept, with openings in Boston Logan and Los Angeles International airports to follow. Luxe touches at the NYC outpost include white marble counter tops and a drinks cart service, plus pillows, vases and coffee table books bearing the signature zigzag pattern of Italian fashion house Missoni.

Artwork plays a key role in bringing a lounge's location to life. Last year, Plaza Premium launched its 'Art and Lounge' series at London Heathrow and Gatwick airports, showcasing contemporary British art, along with opportunities to meet the artists. Jonathan Song, Plaza Premium's global business development director, told *Business Traveller* that 20-25 per cent of the renovation of the group's lounges is focused on adding local culture.

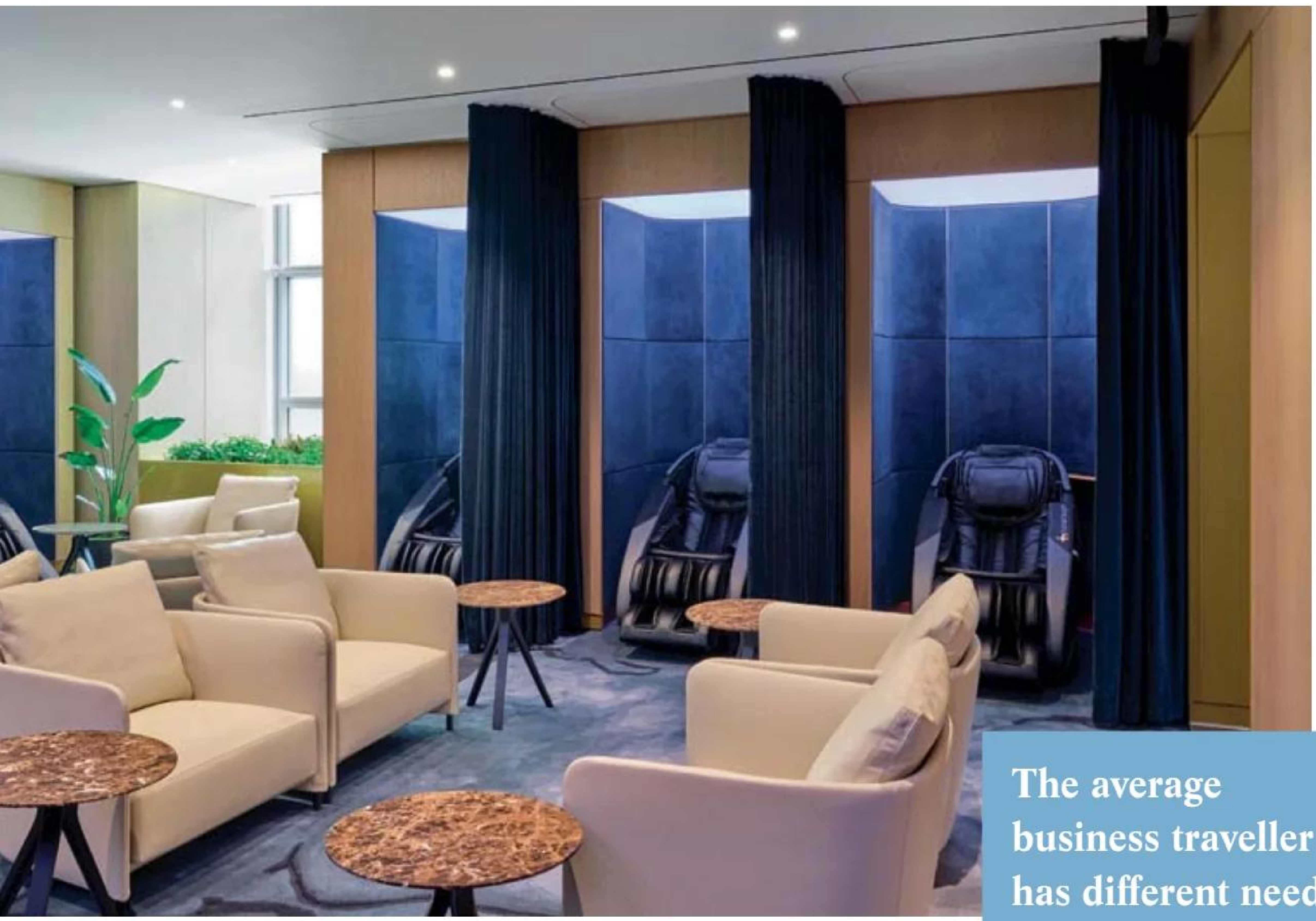
> **Long gone are the days of stale, carbon-copy waiting rooms scattered across the world**

American Express' Centurion Lounges also commission artwork from local artists. Its newest opening in Washington features a mixed-media piece by Claudia "Aziza" Gibson-Hunter, exploring the relationship between spirituality and flight, while Maggie O'Neill's printed canvas of the Capitol Building reminds customers of the city. This year will see a new Amex Centurion lounge at Salt Lake City International Airport's Concourse B. Interiors inspired by Utah's topography will be joined by the real deal – an outdoor terrace with views of the Wasatch Mountains.

TASTE OF THE PLACE

The F&B service is also key to unlocking that sense of place.

→



In early 2024, I visited Singapore Airlines' refurbished SilverKris lounges at London Heathrow, which whets your appetite for your destination through the culinary offering. My overwhelming memory is tucking into the savoury carrot cake – a concoction of stir-fried turnip and egg crafted from staff member Sharmila's family recipe. It was a heartwarming experience in both senses of the word, adding that degree of authenticity to the offering.

Airport Dimensions' Weston mirrors my enthusiasm, discussing the focus on southern hospitality at The Club CHS in Charleston. "We've pivoted the food offering to be in tune with the sense of place. The shrimp and crab salad was absolutely delicious. If you get to Charleston, you must try it," he says.

Plaza Premium's Song, meanwhile, raves about the group's lounge in Kuala Lumpur. "The design has batik elements, as well as an amazing graffiti wall representing the Malay, Indian and Chinese cultures," he enthuses, adding that it has "the best laksa you can find in the whole airport".

HEALTH IS WEALTH

Airport terminals can make even the calmest frequent flyer feel stressed. Thankfully today's premium lounges double as spa sanctuaries, giving passengers the opportunity to kick back, relax and keep Hulk tendencies at bay.

> **The average business traveller has different needs throughout the cycle of their day**

"The average business traveller has different needs throughout the cycle of their day. First thing in the morning, you need something convenient and efficient so you can get to your destination on time and prepared. Later on in the day, when you've done your business, you want the same level of connectivity and convenience but in a more relaxed and reflective way," says Weston.

FROM TOP: The wellness room and shower facilities at the Delta One Lounge in JFK; The breakfast offering at the Infinity Room within the Plaza Premium First Lounge in Hong Kong

Showers stocked with luxury toiletries are now commonplace, but shiny new offerings include lavish treatments and dedicated relaxation areas – plus mood lighting, biophilic interiors and oasis-like outdoor terraces so you can pick up some pre-flight vitamin D.

The Delta One Lounge at JFK has nine relaxation pods with full-body massage chairs, along with treatments by Grown Alchemist-certified therapists. Customers can also swap hard spirits for fruit and herb-infused waters and juices at the aptly named Rejuvenation Bar.

For those that prefer a bit of 'me' time, the Serenity Lounge features lamps that mimic the colours affecting the body's circadian rhythms – gearing you up for your new time zone. If that isn't luxe enough, guests can leave clothes and shoes in a closet to be steamed and/or shined while they shower.

Elsewhere, Air France has opened a Clarins spa area at its lounge at LAX's Tom Bradley International Terminal offering 'anti jetlag', 'instant detox' and 'illuminating eye-care' treatments – we'll take all three.

IT PAYS TO BE LOYAL

Lounges are certainly becoming more accessible to the masses thanks to

IMAGES: JASON DEWEY 2024

pay-per-use options and premium credit card benefits, but a trend has emerged for more exclusive offerings.

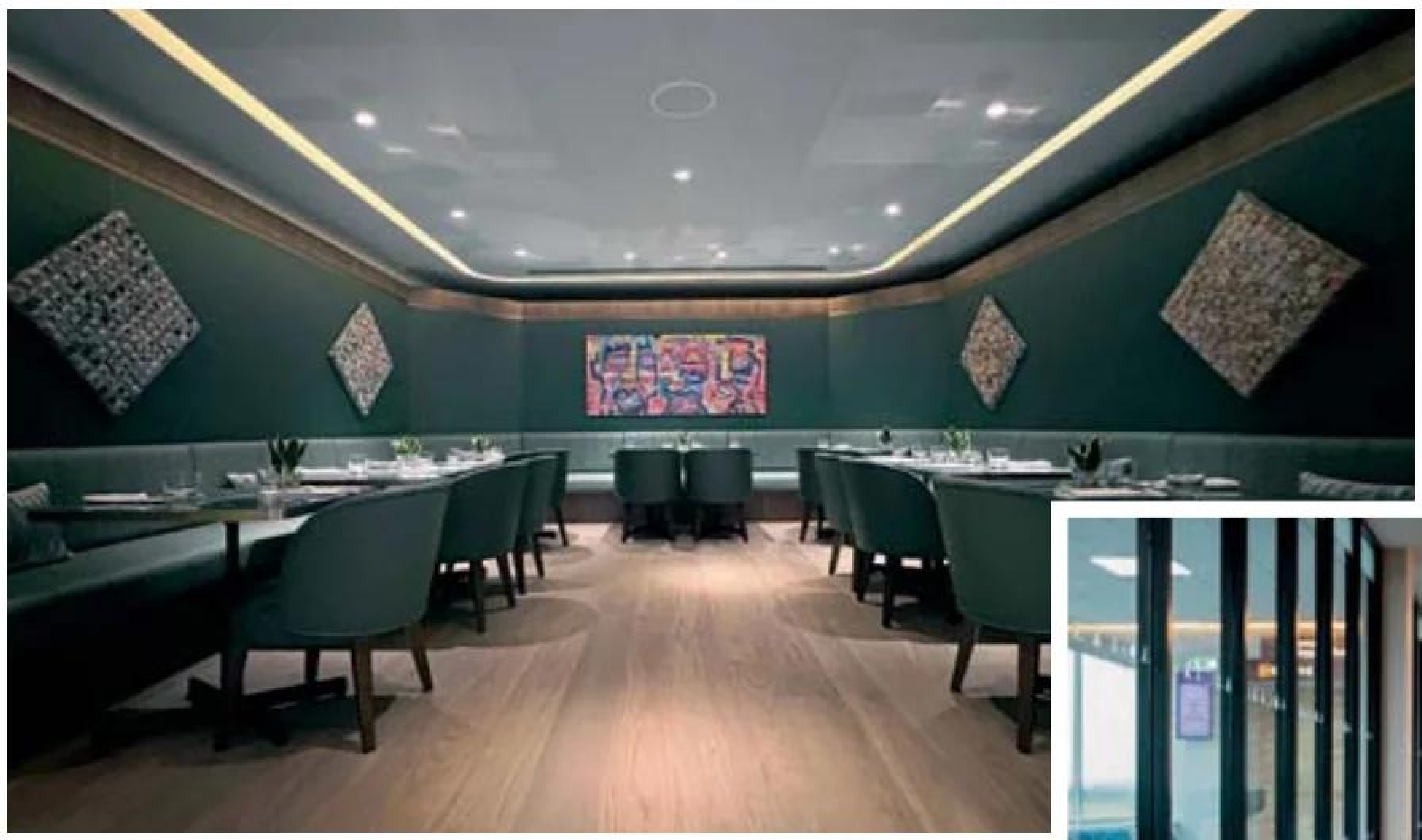
Operators have pivoted towards the lounge-within-a-lounge concept, sectioning off areas with enhanced service for VIP guests – those travelling in first class or top-tier members of loyalty programmes.

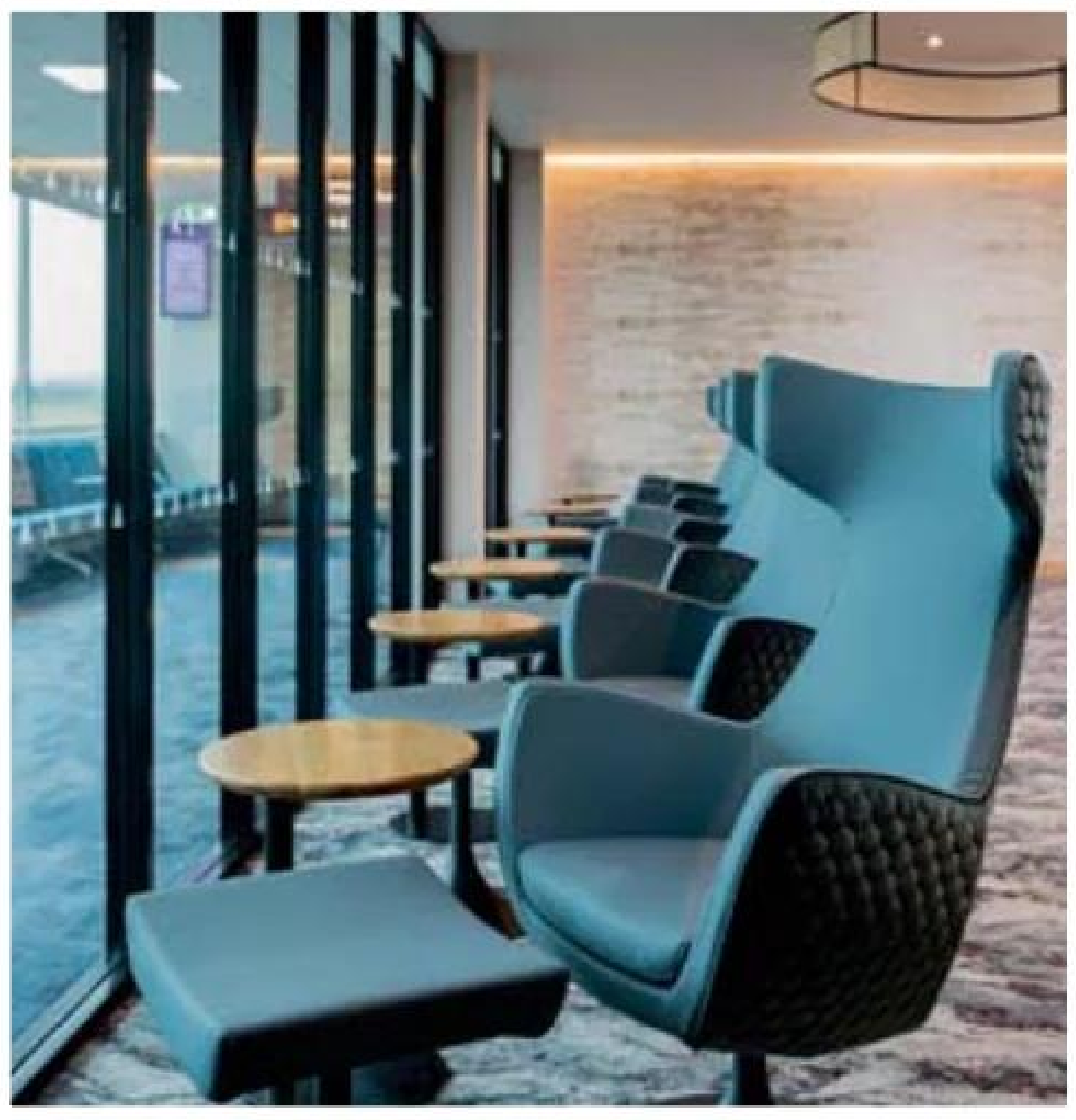
In September, Plaza Premium Group launched its Infinity Room concept within the Plaza Premium First Lounge at Hong Kong International Airport's Terminal 1. The high-end space features à la carte dining, table service and even a swanky drinks trolley.

Hospitality extends beyond the walls of the lounge, with passengers whisked by buggy from the lounge to the gate – so there's no mixing with the riff-raff in the main terminal. "We want to create a seamless end-to-end journey, not just limited to the lounge," explains Song.

Entry is currently complimentary for Qatar Airways' first class customers, as well as Qatar Airways Privilege Club Platinum and oneworld Emerald members – though the lounge operator confirmed to *Business Traveller* that it is in discussions with all airlines and has plans to expand the concept to further destinations in the future.

Plaza Premium Group isn't the first to roll out this hybrid proposition. Swissport's Aspire created a 'three-tier' lounge at Newcastle International Airport last April, accommodating economy, business and first class passengers in one 1,100 sqm space. The classic Aspire lounge is joined by Luxe by Aspire and The Suite by Aspire products, with the latter two exclusive areas located on the left as you enter – much like a premium cabin onboard. Luxe offers a self-service buffet along with private and open-plan workspaces, while The Suite provides a welcome drink plus table service.





FROM ABOVE LEFT: Plaza Premium's Infinity Room in Hong Kong; The Suite by Aspire at Newcastle International Airport

Finnair, too, reported a rise in demand for exclusive spaces and accordingly unveiled an exclusive zone for its most loyal members at its new Schengen lounge at Helsinki Airport last June. Dubbed the Platinum Corner, the area is open to Finnair Plus Platinum Lumo and Platinum members, along with oneworld Emerald members.

Oneworld, meanwhile, is rewarding its most loyal members with its own branded lounges. The alliance entered the sector with playfully designed facilities at Seoul Incheon International Airport and Amsterdam Schiphol earlier this year (see our review at businesstraveller.com/tried-and-tested).

DESTINATION UNKNOWN

Personality-rich lounges with wellness spaces and locally inspired design are here to stay, but what's next for the industry? Personalisation will become ever more important to elevate the service, while digital offerings and pre-booking capabilities will help to maintain that exclusivity. In the meantime, I'm off to book a flight to Charleston to test-drive the shrimp and crab salad. See you there!

NEW AND REFURBISHED LOUNGES IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Emirates Lounge, King Abdulaziz International Airport, Terminal 1
Located on the third floor of the Departures area – a 10-minute walk from the terminal's entrance and a 3-5-minute walk to the boarding gates, A28B and A38B, where Emirates' three daily flights are situated during the day – this is Emirates' first-ever lounge in Saudi Arabia, and the first and only Emirates dedicated lounge in the region outside of Dubai. Opened last summer, the 900 sqm lounge accommodates customers flying on its triple daily A380 services, catering to Emirates' first and business class passengers, as well as Emirates Skywards Platinum and Gold members, with the capacity to accommodate more than 190 guests at any one time.

Emirates Lounge, Dubai International Airport, Terminal 3, Concourse B
In October 2024, the Moët & Chandon Champagne Lounge – an exclusive space within this popular business lounge – launched a new pairing menu for bubbles and canapés for guests. The branded space opened in 2016 and features a golden wave design adorned with 2,400 gold leaves.

The Shanyrak, Almaty Airport, Kazakhstan
Available to Air Astana's business class passengers and eligible Nomad Club loyalty members departing on international flights, the lounge features separate work and rest areas, showers, and facilities for passengers with limited mobility. It can accommodate over 100 guests and is open 24 hours a day. In December, Air Astana announced a codeshare with Etihad Airways, and commenced flights between Almaty and Abu Dhabi.

flydubai Business Class Lounge, Dubai International Airport, Terminal 2
Opened on 16 December 2024, this 900m lounge can accommodate more than 200 passengers at a time. It has its own boarding gates (with dedicated buses to take guests to the planes), workstations, a quiet zone, prayer room, shower facilities, and excellent dining.

IMAGES: JONATHAN COSH OF VISUAL EYE

WORDS YI-HWA HANNA

High Flyers

As **Dubai Duty Free** once again breaks records and sets major new milestones during its 41st year, the company is readying its roadmap to lead the charge for a new era

ABOVE: Dubai Duty Free has been operating for over 41 years, having celebrated its 40th anniversary on 20 December 2023

Effective from 1 June 2024, Ramesh Cidambi was appointed as the new Managing Director of Dubai Duty Free. Reporting directly to H.H. Sheikh Ahmed bin Saeed Al Maktoum, President of Dubai Civil Aviation Authority and Chairman of Dubai Duty Free, Cidambi had previously spent eight years as the company's Chief Operating Officer. He had first joined back in 1988, as head of the retailer's IT division, and has steadily risen through the ranks over the past 36 years – playing a key role in growing the company into not just one of the world's largest airport retailers in a single location, but one of the biggest and best travel retail operators across the globe.

A month earlier, Dubai Duty Free had claimed the title of "Best Duty Free Shopping in the Middle East" at the *Business Traveller Middle East* Awards for the 23rd year in a row. It was one more accolade among the 780 awards the company has earned both regionally and globally since it first opened in December 1983. Beyond its own success, the company has also played an instrumental role in establishing Dubai's position to the world, and acted as a major contributor to the UAE economy.

During the first 11 months of 2024 alone, the company recorded US$1.94 billion in sales. The year before, it hit a record US$2.16 billion – an impressive figure showcasing a 24.39 per cent growth from 2022, and rising 6.40 per cent above its pre-pandemic levels. Barring 2020 – when like many others, it was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic – the company has seen a steady year-on-year increase every single year since its establishment in 1983, when it had recorded a cool US$20 million in its first-year sales.

"In terms of the business, I think the defining story of the last five years would have been the catastrophe that was [the COVID-19 pandemic], and the recovery from that. During the year 2020, when the impact of COVID was at its maximum, the airport did about 26 million passengers. Most of the 26 million were in the first three months of the year. The airport shut down on 25 March. And we shut our shops on the 25 March, reopening

on 3 June. In the whole month of June, we did half the number of passengers that we normally would in one day," Cidambi says.

Cidami tells us that they recorded 105,000 passengers in June of 2020 – for context, on a normal day, this figure would hit about 240,000. "[The pandemic] was very dramatic," he says, sharing that the business only took in US$697 million in 2020. Before that, the travel retailer had achieved a new record of US$2.029 billion in 2019. By 2021, their passenger numbers had recovered a little, coming back up to 29 million passengers and sales of US$976 million. In 2022, passenger numbers went up to 66 million and sales of US$1.74 billion. Then in 2023, passenger numbers recovered so much that they reached around 88 million, with sales now exceeding US$2 billion. From a staffing perspective, too, their numbers are now equal to or even slightly higher than what they were pre-COVID. During our interview, Cidambi recited these numbers from memory, reflective of his laser-sharp focus.

It's an inspiring comeback story achieved in record time. It's also not hard to see that the leadership behind this team, from Cidambi himself to his predecessor, Colm McLoughlin – a visionary force who had a pioneering impact on the company for more than 40 years – has played an enormous role in its success. McLoughlin's legacy wasn't just to leave behind a successful company, but also, a team of people who also bring an exceptional philosophy to the table – including Cidambi.

FROM TOP: A ribbon-cutting ceremony at Dubai Duty Free on 8 November 2024; Ramesh Cidambi

"In terms of retail success, we've had a 40 year [track] record. We have been profitable without exception until 2020, and 2020 was the only year where we made a very small loss, before we once again became profitable by 2021 onwards. Including 2024, that means we've been profitable for 40 out of the 41 years of our existence. So when you take over a business like that, the first principle is to respect what we have done in the past, while also being prepared to make changes for the future. Because the context changes.

"The emphasis in the past was promoting Dubai as a business and leisure destination, promoting the airport, and becoming the best Duty Free in the world – all of which were extremely important objectives. But now, the promotion of Dubai is also being [spearheaded] by many other entities, from the Dubai Economy and Tourism Department to Emirates Airlines, both of whom are big players. So for us, as a business, it's now more important for us to do more with the passengers, and utilise our position at the airport," Cidambi explains.

In terms of his leadership style, Cidambi says that as someone who has been in the business for such a long time, he is very clear-eyed about looking towards the future with facts-based expectations. His personal philosophy, however, is extremely people-focused. He believes that for those in leadership positions, "our job is primarily to make other people's jobs easier." This includes being held accountable for making key decisions, and for the impact of those decisions. "[It's] a combination of being a coach while also helping your team reach their potential," he says, adding: "We always keep in mind that we are a service organisation above all, so our primary purpose is to serve the passengers using the airport."

Cidambi believes this multifaceted approach is essential to leadership in the current day. "Ultimately, it's a people's business. It's a cliché to say that people are what make the difference, but it's true. It's human beings with emotions, feelings, and thoughts who help you to achieve your objectives. And with the nature of retail, you have a very large base of people who are exposed to passengers day by day. [As a leader], it's a very asymmetrical relationship, wherein you can have a great deal of impact on their lives, but it's hard for them to have the same amount of impact on your life. So you have to be very cognisant of the power that you have in that – the effect of your words and your actions,"

IMAGES: DUBAI DUTY FREE

he says. Cidambi firmly believes that great leaders should be able to take responsibility for their actions and support their team even when the chips are down – because "you can't expect loyalty from your employees if you don't look after them when things get complicated."

Indeed, Cidambi has taken the reigns at an incredibly pivotal time for the business – and continuing to invest in the people is still a key part of his vision. Looking ahead to the next five years, he says that he doesn't expect anywhere near the acceleration of the past. "As the airport gets closer and closer to its capacity, both in terms of aircraft movements and its ability to handle the number of passengers, there will be more congestion. [This] means potentially less time for passengers to shop," he explains. "The airport is absolutely doing whatever they can to mitigate that, but that is something we need to watch. We have to be realistic," he adds.

"The second thing that we have to be aware of is that most geographies that are important to us from a destination point of view – such as the Indian subcontinent, Europe, North America, the Far East – have experienced high inflation in a general sense. [Across the world], the general cost of living has gone up," he says.

As cocoa prices have increased, confectionary items have seen a 15 per cent price increase from 2019. On alcohol, price increases averaged 15 per cent, while in perfumes, it was 10-11 per cent. "In fashion, there have been significant price increases for exactly the same item," he says. "If you compare 2019 to 2024, you will see double digit price increases in many categories. The cost of travel in general has also gone up," he says, highlighting that these changes inevitably impact the spend per passenger. As DDF looks ahead, their focus in the coming year will be on increasing this spend. To do this, Cidami believes the key is the human factor.

"In practical terms, it means more investment in the employees – training and motivating them. It [also] means more investment in renovation and refurbishment," he says, keenly pointing out that as people have less time to get around, helping them access more of their favourite shops more easily will help them shop with more convenience.

And as modern shoppers increasingly crave immersive and interactive experiences from brick-and-mortar stores, creating a more attractive environment for shopping is essential – whether that's getting better lighting, better flooring, new furniture, or new activations. These changes coexist alongside factors like price competitiveness and range – but even in Duty Free retail's unique 24-hour environment, where you can't shut down the shops so upgrades are harder, it's a worthy investment. DDF is investing at least Dhs200 million into renovations and refurbishments, and Cidambi is certain that the benefits from 2026 onwards will be worth it.

They have also invested in the technology and sustainability aspects of the business, in the most practical ways. Enabling the acceptance of more currencies as well as different types of payment systems at point of sale, for instance – as well as utilising data to strategically improve the human aspect of the retail experience – both help to reduce friction and, once again, make things more convenient for shoppers. Finding innovative ways to help passengers reduce stress and receive better service are among the priorities being improved through the information gleaned from technology.

When it comes to sustainability, the company's focus is once again about giving customers more choice, and not taking away the convenience factor. Rather than enforcing people to switch out plastic bags (especially when DDF's bags are famously sturdy – an essential component for purchases of heavy bottles, for instance), they offer both an eco-friendly as well as a classic option. The goal here is to help their customers transition to more greener practices without shaming them for their practical needs.

Dubai Duty Free has also invested in training their staff about sustainability. They have spent many years doing significant amounts of recycling, and even launched a line of products called Love Earth, featuring eco-friendly items that somehow give back. This community-minded aspect is reflective of the company's many years of philanthropic efforts that have seen it supporting charitable organisations and eco initiatives within the UAE and beyond.

With a leadership team – and a business ethos – that believes in the importance of using success and profits to give back to the community, as Dubai Duty Free prepares for another winning trajectory, its city – and those who pass through it – also stands much to gain. BT

COLLECT ON YOUR RETURN
CIGARS
TOBACCO
EXPERIENCE WHISKY REIMAGINED

TOP: A Dubai Duty Free shop in Dubai International Airport's Terminal 3, Concourse B West

It's a cliché to say that people are what make the difference, but it's true

AÜ FINJA
Crafting Your Curiosity
AU FINJA 750
AU FINJA 750
YUME

The rail thing

WORDS VINAY BHASKARA

ILLUSTRATION: YO HOSOYAMADA

Why airlines and train companies are partnering to increase options for travellers on short journeys

FROM ABOVE: Lufthansa and Deutsche Bahn have connected air-rail passengers since the 1990s; Ryanair's CEO opposes flight-route bans

IMAGE: DEUTSCHE BAHN AG/GEORG WAGNER

An intercity flight connection operated by train would have been almost unthinkable in the early 1990s, but in coming years, it will increasingly be the default experience at many European hub airports. European nations have been among the world's leaders in adopting high-speed rail for short-distance trips, along with Asian countries such as Japan and China.

Europe now has more than 9,970km of high-speed railway tracks, and on routes like Barcelona to Madrid, almost 75 per cent of passengers choose the Renfe train over an aeroplane. Advocates claim this is a boon for sustainability, as high-speed trains offer up to 98 per cent reduction in carbon emissions per passenger.

But many travellers select the train because they prefer the travel experience. Local travellers enjoy the convenience of beginning and ending their journey in the city centre, and the elevated passenger experience on the rails: extra legroom, wider seats, and high-quality meals.

Business travellers also love working with a laptop for nearly the entire 2.5 hour journey; there's usually less than half an hour of productive time on the 75-minute Iberia flight. It's little wonder that up to thirty 400-plus-seat trains run daily between Madrid and Barcelona.

SHORT FLIGHTS ARE ON THE CHOPPING BLOCK

And yet Iberia still operates 16 daily Madrid-Barcelona flights. Passengers travelling between both cities overwhelmingly choose the train, but passengers travelling to the rest of Europe mostly want to fly. This pattern is repeated across Europe – the need for connectivity to global airline networks has kept flight levels high. In response, governments across the continent are adopting aggressive regulations. For example, in 2023, France banned the sale of airline tickets between French cities with a train journey of 2.5 hours or less, and Spain proposed a similar restriction.

European airline leaders have had mixed reactions to these laws.

> **If you're serious about reaching your sustainability goals, the train is not a competitor**

Some, such as KLM's chief executive officer Marjan Rintel, have been supportive. "If you're serious about reaching your sustainability goals, the train is not a competitor," said Rintel in an interview with the *Financial Times*.

Others, like Ryanair CEO Michael O'Leary, have been far more critical. "We've had all this bull***t here in Brussels for the last ten years, whether it's flight-shaming this or some-other-thing that," said O'Leary in October. Around 10 per cent of Ryanair's 3,000 daily European flights are within the 500km radius impacted by these bans.

Regardless of the sentiments of their CEOs, European airlines will face ever growing pressure to cut back on short flights due to environmental concerns. According to the French Civil Aviation Authority, a passenger flying from Paris Orly to Nantes generates 50 kg of CO2 emissions. A train on the same route generates less than a kilo. A continent-wide shift to rail would have massive environmental benefits. Arie Bleijenberg, chairman of the Brussels-based Transport & Environment think tank, says that "the potential reduction in CO2 from intra-European aviation, by a modal shift from air travel to railways, is 6 to 11 per cent of the CO2 emissions from intra-[Europe] aviation." Trains are fundamentally more sustainable than planes.

AIR-RAIL CONNECTIONS GROW

Achieving these benefits requires deeper integration between rail and airline networks. Existing programmes are widespread across Europe: Air France partners with SNCF, ITA Airways with Trenitalia, KLM with Eurostar, and Iberia with Renfe. Perhaps the most successful of these partnerships is the oldest, between Lufthansa and Germany's national rail company, Deutsche Bahn (DB), which transports nearly 600,000 passengers annually. In 2022, DB joined Star Alliance before launching air-rail programmes with United Airlines and Air Canada.

These partnerships are reasonably integrated, with airline codes on corresponding train journeys and tickets bookable directly on the airline's website. Passengers also receive perks and benefits corresponding with their booking class and frequent flyer status, including mileage accrual, priority service, baggage storage during layovers, and access to rail lounges. →

FROM LEFT: Brightline's MiamiCentral Station; Spain's Renfe high-speed train offers up to 30 daily trips between Madrid and Barcelona

IMAGES: COURTESY OF BRIGHTLINE; COURTESY OF RENFE

Last summer, frequent flyer Joseph McCulloch booked a business class itinerary on Air France for himself and his wife. The itinerary included a leg from New York to Paris as well as a connecting train ride operated by SNCF from Paris to Brussels. According to McCulloch, the experience at Paris Charles de Gaulle was not seamless.

"Unfortunately, aside from my app showing a train icon for the Paris-Brussels leg, there was no indication anywhere that this was a train ticket. Air France fell short in explaining the transfer as there was no additional communication from anyone else along our journey."

But despite the hiccups, he is open to being a repeat customer. "SNCF was a comfortable way to get from Paris to Brussels. I would book one of these connections again."

WILL AIR-RAIL CONNECTIONS TAKE OFF IN THE US?

The US has limited air and rail connectivity. United Airlines partnered with Amtrak before the pandemic, but this ended in 2021. The partnership allowed passengers to transfer between United flights and Northeast Corridor trains. Although the partnership provided some benefits, it did not offer a high-speed air-to-rail connection. Amtrak's fastest Acela trains have an average operating speed of just 71 mph, lower than the international standard of 155 mph.

Private rail operator Brightline may represent the best opportunity for an air-rail connection. Its new station at Orlando International Airport's recently opened Terminal C offers 16 daily trains to Miami, with a westbound expansion to Tampa planned before the decade's end.

Brightline has received rave reviews for its clean trains, beautiful stations, and VIP lounges. According to George Edwards, Brightline's VP of guest experience, "The first thing people say when they ride the train is: Wow, it is so clean, it smells good. This is how I want to get from South Florida to Central Florida."

According to Edwards, Brightline has already won substantial business from connecting passengers at Orlando. "Brightline already carries international travellers coming from up to 139 different countries."

> **Brightline already carries international travellers coming from up to 139 different countries**

Brightline has even more ambitious plans in the Western US, as it arranges to launch service between Los Angeles and Las Vegas by 2028. Brightline West would offer door-to-door service in two hours and ten minutes, and thrill-seeking Vegas travellers may prefer the hassle-free and alcohol-friendly train journey over driving or flying.

According to Cirium, there are currently some 66 daily flights and nearly 11,000 seats between the five LA-area airports and Las Vegas. Most of these are offered by low-cost carriers, with just 14 daily flights on airlines such as United, Delta and American. Even on these carriers, only 15 to 20 seats per flight are domestic first class. On Brightline, every seat on the train offers better legroom, service, and amenities than domestic first class.

Brightline's pricing strategy will be crucial for its success. Flight tickets between LA and Vegas are cheap, about US$90 for a round trip. Early indications from the Miami-to-Orlando route are positive. Round-trip fares can be purchased for as little as US$98.

Besides Brightline, US prospects for further air-rail integration remain bleak. America does not build a lot of passenger rail, and while the economic and environmental logic for air-rail connections in the Northeast is strong, the sclerotic building environment in the region and a lack of direct airport connectivity means that chances remain slim.

It would be great if some or all of the approximately 50 daily flights between Boston and the New York area were replaced by high-speed trains. But is that a realistic hope when New York can't even build a subway extension to LaGuardia Airport?

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GIG ECONOMY

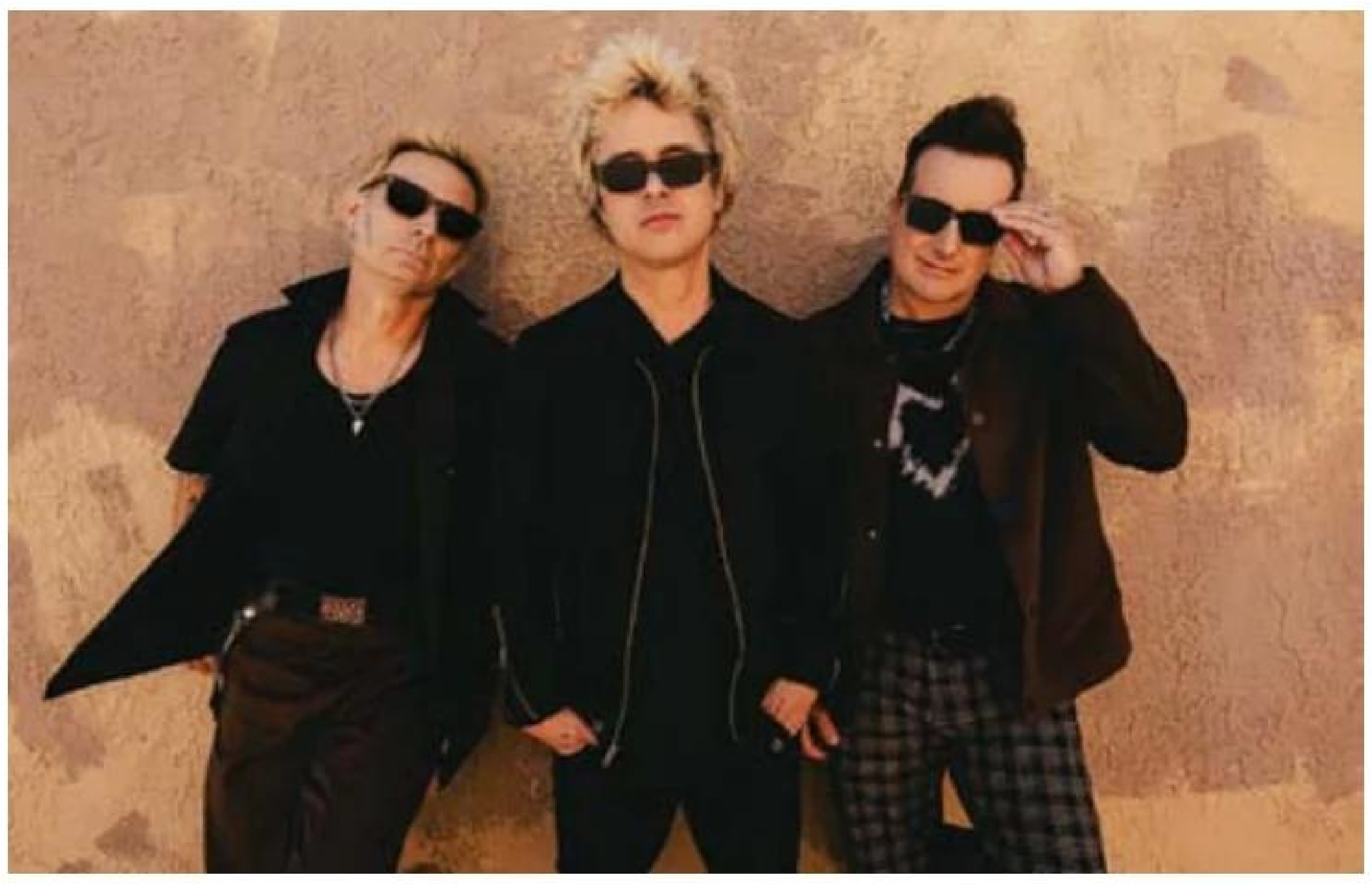
As more and more travellers plan trips around chasing passion-led events across the globe, **"gig-tripping"** isn't just a fad – it's a whole new way to travel

WORDS YI-HWA HANNA

Between 2023 and 2024, former country singer turned international pop star Taylor Swift single-handedly become one of the biggest revenue generators for the global hotel and tourism industries. Already a popular entertainer, this was the era that Swift became a ground-breaking cultural icon. Her aptly-named Eras Tour – which ran from 17 March 2023 to 8 December 2024 – grossed a record US$2 billion dollars, without even counting merchandise. But that wasn't the only reason why it was described as being one of the most disruptive events in music history. It was also because of the impact that it had on fan culture; the way that the tour was promoted and marketed – with a concert film and book also released during its tenure; and the profound impact it had on the global hospitality and travel industry.

Swift's Eras Tour – a record-breaking event consisting of 149 shows in 21 different countries across five continents, with more than 18 different artists enlisted as supporting acts – sold out stadiums across the world... and with them, countless flights and hotels. According to the U.S. Travel Association, each "Swiftie" (as her fans are called) spent an average of US$1,300 on their tour experience, incorporating travel and transport, hotels, food, and merchandise. The price of the tickets themselves typically cost upwards of US$1,000, and fans' spending patterns were more dramatic than any other tour in history. In fact, the association even estimated that as a collective, Swift's fans contributed upwards of US$10 billion in terms of overall economic impact. Sales of merchandise – t-shirts, sweatshirts, tote bags, posters, and more – raked in around US$200 million. Data from JLL, a global property services firm, found that the tour had generated approximately US$1 billion in additional hotel revenue across the U.S., Europe, and Asia, before it had even wrapped.

As a money-making engine, its impact was powerful enough to rival some of the world's most popular events. In fact, Taylor Swift's economic influence has been so intense that a term has been coined for it: Swiftonomics. The daily economic impact of the tour's three-night run in Vancouver, Canada, for instance, reportedly exceeded what the 2010 Winter Olympics did for the city. The global head of research for JLL's hotels group was quoted claiming that on an individualised night basis, the figures from nights of her concert in the French capital in May →



LEFT: Greenday will perform in Dubai in January 2025

BOTTOM: Maroon 5 was a headliner at the Abu Dhabi Grand Prix 2024

OPPOSITE PAGE: Taylor Swift's "The Eras Tour" created a new global phenomenon in travel and tourism, and fan behaviour

IMAGES: KEVIN WINTER/TAS24/GETTY IMAGES; VISIT DUBAI; ETHARA

ABOVE: The UFC has attracted a large number of tourists to Abu Dhabi for its live fight nights in recent years

BOTTOM RIGHT: Eminem's headliner concert at the Abu Dhabi Grand Prix 2024 was a major draw for the event

2024 had outperformed the individualised peak nights at the summer's Olympic Games Paris 2024.

Marriott International – the world's largest hotel group – made good use of the hype. As the touring sponsor in select cities, the group created exclusive offers for members of the Marriott Bonvoy loyalty programme. Bonvoy members who were Swift fans – or Swift fans who became Bonvoy members – had the chance to nab seats at highly sought-after concerts in Europe and North America through exclusive sweepstakes, or by redeeming Marriott Bonvoy Moments points. Some prizes were for concert tickets only; others included air travel and hotel accommodations as well as tickets, with the top ones including a Marriott Bonvoy Welcome Gift.

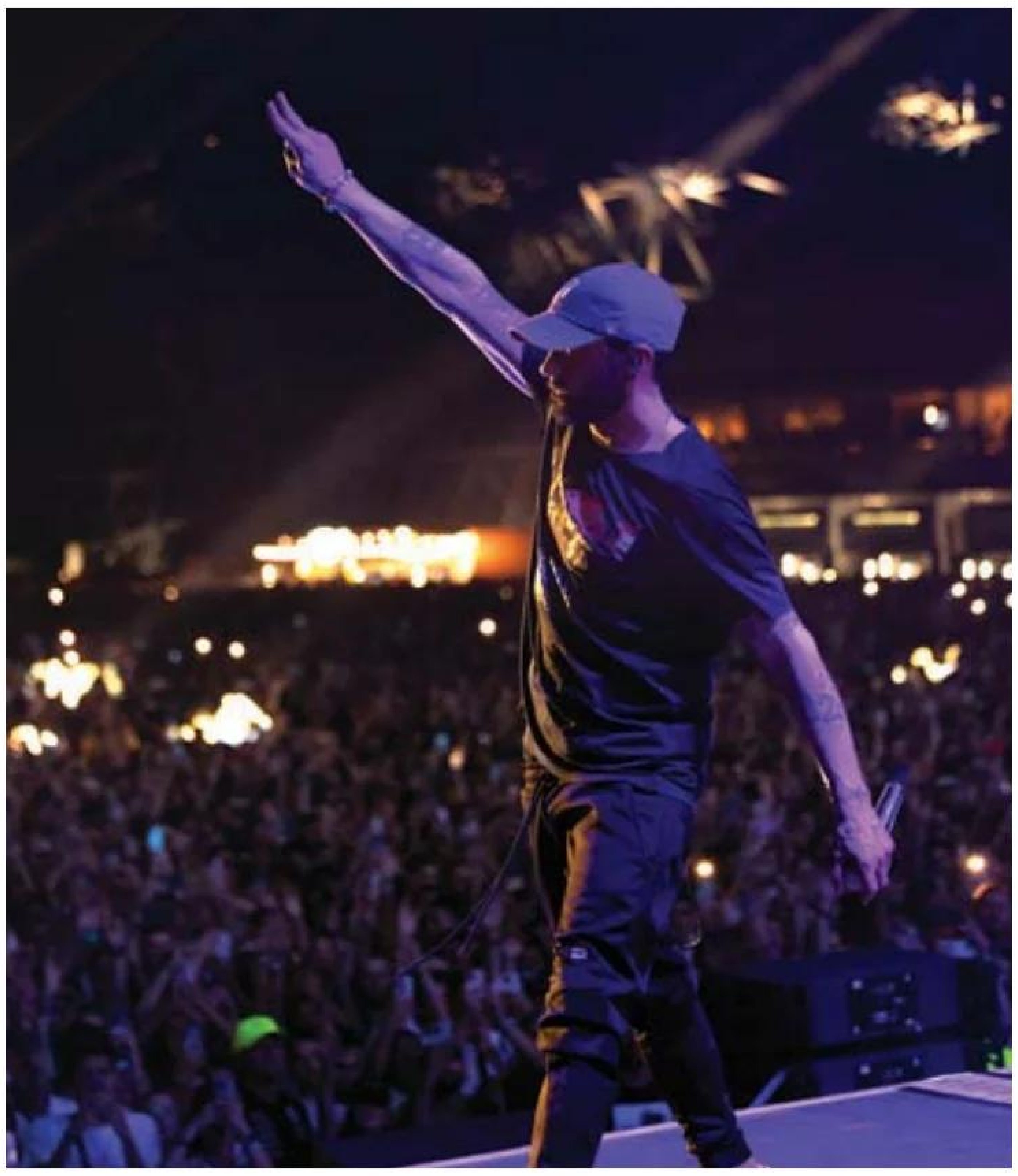
Even hotels that weren't a touring sponsor got on board: the Windsor Court Hotel in New Orleans, Louisiana launched an "Enchanting Eras Tour package" complete with premium suite tickets to the concert and private suite access, Swift-themed rooms (with special merch, including custom headpieces from a local milliner), private transport to and from the concert venue, and US$200 of credit for breakfast or room service at the property. The packages cost US$15,000 for the night in a premium non-club room, or US$17,500 for a premium club option. To enhance the luxury even further, guests could upgrade to the Presidential or King Suite. Meanwhile, in Toronto, the Bisha Hotel renamed one of its suites the "Taylor", with its décor inspired by the pop star, her album artwork, and custom friendship bracelets like those sported by many fans during the tour. To stay there would cost US$1,500 a night. And it didn't stop there: the hotel temporarily transformed five of its floors by theming them around some of Swift's albums, changing its lounge and lobby with Swift-themed elements, and even dressing its staff in clothing inspired by another album.

It was a pretty powerful impact from a petite 35-year-old blonde bombshell from West Reading, Pennsylvania.

The Era's Tour has, in many ways, been a masterclass in how to leverage a buzz-worthy event to create a major travel-related boost. For industry folk the world over, the key lesson here is that fan exploitation can pay some seriously big bucks – and that turning different elements of travel for an event into a rich and immersive experience can really pay off.

GAME, SET, MATCH

Historically, major football events have been another way to attract fans from across the world. The 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar not only boosted the aviation sector through an unprecedented number of flights to Qatar (and its neighbouring countries), the event also inspired changes to the city's infrastructure that had not only significant, but lasting impact. The event was surmised to be the most expensive World Cup in history, but it also injected serious economic benefits back in to the country, with a US$17 billion boost and the creation of nearly 500,000 jobs. Events like this are about more than just bringing guests in for the duration of the event itself – they're also about helping to put the host locations on the world map in a way that they weren't before. Especially in the age of social media, where those who travel for specific events can share their authentic, direct experiences to countless others in every corner of the world, it's an invaluable form of marketing, PR, and brand- and reputation-building on a world stage.



IMAGES: GETTY IMAGES; ETHARA

MARK YOUR CALENDARS FOR THESE EVENTS IN THE REGION IN 2025

SPORTS

2025 Jeddah E-Prix II, 14-15 Feb, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. Held at the Jeddah Corniche Circuit, the electric series will use a short version of the Formula 1 Jeddah Corniche Circuit, with extra chicanes.

Games of the Future 2025, starting 21 Nov, Dubai, UAE. Covering phygital disciplines uniting cyber and classical sports, 100+ countries took part in the first edition in 2024, held in Kazan, Russia.

2025 ESports Olympics, Dates TBC, Saudi Arabia. This will be the inaugural edition, and signifies a new era for international sport.

2025 Abu Dhabi Grand Prix, 5-7 Dec, Abu Dhabi, UAE. This will be the 17th edition of this prestigious event, and the final race of the F1 season.

ARTS & CULTURE

Middle East Film and Comic Con, 18-20 April, Abu Dhabi, UAE. The biggest pop culture event in the Middle East that boasts a large celebrity guest list, this will be its 13th edition.

Red Sea Intl Film Festival, Dates TBC, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. This prestigious annual film festival in historical Jeddah has star-studded line-ups.

Art Dubai 2025, 18-20 April, Dubai, UAE. This is the Middle East's leading international art fair.

Islamic Arts Biennale 2025, 25 Jan-25 May, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. Organised by the Diriyah Biennale Foundation, it will explore how faith is experienced, expressed, and celebrated.

ENTERTAINMENT

Coldplay at Zayed Sports City Stadium, on 11, 12 & 14 Jan, Abu Dhabi, UAE. The British band's Music of the Spheres tour was an instant sell-out in the UAE.

Green Day Live at Expo City Dubai, 27 Jan, Dubai, UAE. This concert will be the iconic rock band's first time ever performing in the Middle East, and they'll be supported by fellow U.S. rockers The Offspring.

Guns N' Roses at Etihad Arena Yas Island, 27 May, Abu Dhabi, UAE. The rock legends will return with their new world tour.

The Corrs at Coca-Cola Arena, 6 Feb, Dubai, UAE. The beloved Irish pop stars will be playing their greatest hits from the past 30 years.

BUSINESS

Gulfood 2025, 17-21 Feb, Dubai, UAE. The world's largest annual food event will take over the Dubai World Trade Centre in February.

GITEX 2025, 23-25 Apr, Dubai, UAE. The biggest tech and startup show in the world will return to the Dubai World Trade Centre this spring.

Arabian Travel Market, 28 Apr-1 May, Dubai, UAE. Held at the DWTC, this highly anticipated trade show is oe of the most important dates on the calendar for the travel and tourism industry.

Future Hospitality Summit 2025, Various Dates. FHS Saudi Arabia will be held in Riyadh from 11-13 May, and FHS World in Dubai, UAE, from 27-29 October.

In December 2024, Saudi Arabia won an uncontested bid to host the 2034 FIFA World Cup. With the event set to take place just four years after the country arrives at its Vision 2030, it will undoubtedly draw even more eyes to the kingdom's many unique offerings in travel and tourism.

Events of a smaller scale can also lure in visitors who will book hotels and restaurants, shop, and make the most of their time at a destination. When Abu Dhabi's Fight Island launched in the UAE capital in 2020, it was described by Dana White, president and CEO of the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC), as a workaround for travel restrictions around the COVID-19 pandemic. These restrictions had made it difficult for some international fighters to enter the U.S. to compete there – and as a private island that would even have a bio-secure bubble, the UAE's Yas Island was proposed as the ideal location to hold them. Although the UAE capital had already had a long-standing relationship with the UFC – with 18 related events having been held there since 2010 – Fight Island made global headlines in a big way, highlighting the appeal of visiting the city for tourism, as well as sporting events. The partnership between the UFC and the Department of Culture and Tourism - Abu Dhabi was made official in 2019, and has already been extended until 2028.

→

ABOVE: A "Welcome To Saudi34" sign seen in December 2024, when Saudi Arabia was announced the host nation for the FIFA World Cup 2034

Another major sporting partnership attracting global talent – and fans – to Abu Dhabi is The NBA Abu Dhabi Games. In 2021, the National Basketball Association (NBA) and the Department of Culture and Tourism - Abu Dhabi announced a multi-year partnership to host the first NBA games in the UAE, that would begin in 2022. In 2024, the third edition of the event – with the Boston Celtics and Denver Nuggets going head-to-head at Etihad Arena – not only enticed NBA fans from the entire MENA region and beyond to the games, it also saw the players visiting cultural sites, and their personnel meeting with local businesses. *The New York Times* published a piece titled "Why the NBA is making Abu Dhabi its Middle East hub." Hotels in the capital created special packages for fans: the Ramada by Wyndham Abu Dhabi Corniche offered deals on rooms or suites with tickets to the games, while the Rixos Premium Saadiyat Island curated an NBA-themed staycation package, including a stay in a one-bedroom suite, complimentary tickets to the games, all-inclusive meals, and access to the hotel's pool, beach, and entertainment facilities such as a tennis court.

Sponsorships are another way for brands to get in on the action. In 2024, IHG Hotels & Resorts became the official hotel partner of the Emirates Dubai 7s – an annual rugby sevens and social event founded in 1970, which is the longest-running sports event in the Middle East. Through its partnership with Manchester United, Marriott Bonvoy offers its members exclusive fan access, from going behind the scenes at Old Trafford to meeting team players. Last summer, the Marriott Palm Resort Jumeirah unveiled the "Twinned Suite of Dreams" – a room themed around the club, created in honour of the 25th anniversary of its historic 1998-1999 Treble-winning season. Available for a limited time only, its themed décor included unique memorabilia, such as a hub for 90s-era movies, music, and games (complete with curated VHS videos of classic team tales and matches); an adidas Predator Boot display; game-worn jerseys and authentic matchday programmes; and a retro mini-bar stuffed with treats that fans enjoyed during the decade's matches. Meanwhile, Premier Inn Middle East hedged a bet on racing by sponsoring a team in the 2023 Formula Ethara junior racing team's Rookie category. The brand – which places high value on supporting sporting and community events across the Middle East – was rewarded by being able to share the joy of their sponsored team, Limitless Speed, as they became the winning team.

GOOD INNINGS

In 2022, DP World announced a five-year title sponsorship for the International League T20. In 2024, airport hospitality brand Encalm came on-board as a sponsor. For the 2025 season, sports tourism company ES Sport is offering fans all-inclusive ticket access and hospitality packages. ILT20 will run from 11 January to 9 February 2025.

The aviation industry, too, has long seen the merit of sponsoring sporting teams and events. Many Middle Eastern airlines – including Qatar Airways, Emirates, Turkish Airlines, and Etihad Airways – have famously sponsored the world's best teams in football, tennis, motorsports, horse racing, cricket, and more, as well as events like the Special Olympics. On the cultural front, many aviation and hospitality brands also sponsor festivals, performances, and events surrounding music, film, and literature. Emirates, for instance, has been the title sponsor of the Emirates Literature Foundation's Emirates Airline Festival of Literature – the Arab world's largest celebration of the written and spoken word, now one of the world's leading international literary festivals – since its first edition back in 2009. MICE travel continues to be another major events-driven tourism boon, attracting thousands of people to a city for Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, and Exhibitions – and the "bleisure" that tends to follow.

GIG-ONOMICS

In the current day, the term "Gig Economy" is typically used to describe a labour market characterised by a growing prevalence for short-term contracts or freelance work, versus permanent jobs – and "gigonomics" essentially describes the economic effects of this trend. But if Taylor Swift's Eras Tour has taught us anything, it's that the *other* definitions of a gig – live performances, or opportunities to earn income outside of standard, long-term situations – can be just as lucrative. In a world where limited-edition products or services – and the sense of urgency, exclusivity, and FOMO (fear of missing out) they can create among consumers – are so highly coveted, events-driven travel, aka gig-tripping, is an opportunity too great to ignore.

From concerts by world-leading musical artists to theatrical performances, sporting events, gastronomical festivals, corporate summits, MICE events, networking meet-ups, seminars and workshops, charitable occasions, and more, there is no shortage of inspiration for savvy businesses to get creative and capitalise on the power of community. Whatever the interest, no matter how common or niche it is, it will have its dedicated followers. By offering more people the chance to immerse themselves in their passions, hobbies, or careers in a way that feels truly rewarding and deeply experiential, there is plenty of opportunity to create a win-win situation for brands and consumers alike. The key here is authenticity – to really speak to the fans, it is essential to understand the fans: what they want, what drives them, what they value. And for brands who can tap into that, the sky's the limit.

IMAGES: GETTY IMAGES; ETHARA

Village Popeye bay

View of the lighthouse and the citadel of the city of Valletta

WORDS ZANA AZEREDO

24 HOURS IN Malta

This beautiful island in the middle of the Mediterranean appeals to cruise travellers, adventure seekers, and history-loving culture vultures alike

MORNING

Once ruled by the Phoenicians, the Romans, the Arabs, the French, the British, and many others in between, this European island country is the world's tenth-smallest country by area – it's only 316 sq km in size.

Start your day with a walking tour around Valletta, the fortified capital city of Malta. Situated on a hilly peninsula, it's also a UNESCO heritage centre. It takes around three hours to explore on foot – comfortable walking shoes are advised. Begin by strolling by the Triton Fountain. Walk through Valletta's Main Gate, pass by the Opera House, and head down Triq Ir-Repubblika towards Fort St Elmo, peeking into the alleyways of limestone buildings decorated with colourful enclosed balconies along the way. Double back to the Lower Barraka Gardens for stunning views.

Return through Triq Il-Merkanti, stopping at St. John's Co-Cathedral. Buying a ticket well in advance is highly advisable, to not only skip the queues but secure your entrance to this must-see sight. The inside of this church, built in 1577 by the Order of Knights of St John, is one of the finest examples of Baroque style, with impressive golden walls and an array of statues and paintings. Its entire floor is made of inlaid marble tombstones, considered the most beautiful in the world. It also hosts a large collection of Caravaggio's paintings – including his largest and the only one he has ever signed – and an exhibition on his works and life, including details of how he became a Knight of Malta. Audio guides are provided for free.

AFTERNOON

Come lunchtime, next door to St. John's Co-Cathedral is Helu Manna – a restaurant where the pizza, the arancini, and even the cannoli are not only delicious, but are also all gluten-free. One block away is Trattoria da Pippo, a cozy restaurant with delicious seafood, pasta, and a strong local Maltese following – bookings are highly recommended. After, walk towards the pier, passing by Ta' Giezu Church with its magnificent red velvet drapes and chandeliers, through the Victoria Gate, past signs to the Three Cities ferry. For a sweet tooth fix, try nougat and imqarat – a date tart.

Harbor of Marsaxlokk

Boat trip around the Blue grotto

Our Lady of Mount Carmel basilica

At the pier, pay €3 to take a Luzzu – a Phoenician-style boat that can carry four to six people – across the water to Birgu within 10 minutes. Disembark in front of the Maritime Museum to stroll along the waterfront, and admire the superyachts along the way. Explore Fort St. Angelo (a site used as a set for *Game of Thrones*) with 360-degree views of the bay. Walk back to St. Lawrence Church and climb up the steps, navigating through the unique pedestrian alleyways. Admire the colourful doors, get lost in Maltese architecture, and experience the local life. Find your way to the Freedom Day monument and then return to Valletta by Luzzu or on the ferry.

Once back, Caffe Cordina, established in 1837, is a good option for a pick-me-up with old palatial charm. For sunset views of the Three Cities of Birgu, Karkala, and Senglea, head to the Upper Barraka gardens where, if lucky, you will watch the cannons go off in tribute to the historical naval conquests Malta endured over the centuries.

EVENING

There are several options for a pre-dinner drink on the sloped alleys of Valletta. On St Lucia Street, the casual atmosphere is often matched with good live music. For dinner, head to Grain Street restaurant, a sister venue of the Michelin-starred Under Grain, with à la carte options at the street level. You won't be disappointed with the Mimolette as a starter, the chicken and hazelnut for the main, and the caramelised local figs with seaweed ice cream for dessert. If the local delicacy of rabbit is on your wish list, Palazzo Preca offers delicious and well-sized portions.

After dinner, enjoy exceptional singers and bands performing outdoors at La Bottega from Wednesdays to Sundays starting at 9pm. End your day with a sleep at 66 Saint Paul's Boutique Hotel & Spa. The interior courtyard, comfortable beds, and tiled floors make this a great base, just a few metres away from all the main attractions. The street-facing suite on the second floor is spacious with double-height ceilings and a mezzanine: a treat after a long day of exploration.

If you wind up with an extra half-day, immerse yourself in history at il'Mdina, the medieval "Silent City" where many films have been shot, just 20 minutes away from Valletta. BT

Emirates currently operates flights between Dubai and Malta seven times a week.

IMAGES: PARILOV, ODIN DANIEL, ALEXANDER, VOLOLIBERO, AERIAL FILM STUDIO/ADOBE STOCK

Coastal Wonders

From luxury resorts to hidden islands, the Saudi Red Sea is already set to be the world's next greatest destination for coastal tourism. With three distinct areas that each offer unique sights, activities, and places to stay, here's your must-have guide.

With pristine waters, untouched islands, and Arabian luxury, the Saudi Red Sea is a new dream for those who enjoy the invigorating yet relaxing vibe of places like Italy's Amalfi Coast, or France's Côte d'Azur. It's also a chance for travel pioneers to be among the first to see and experience what is fast-becoming one of the most coveted hotspots – with stunning sights and activities, all with a unique Arabian flavour for life.

Divided into three key areas – the North, Central, and South – all three promise some of the country's best natural beauty, diverse options for recreation, and world-class hotels and service. Yet each area also has its own distinct identity, giving visitors plenty of reasons to return again and again.

From the ultra luxury of the North – with world-class golf, superyachts, and cutting-edge wellness programmes; to the boundless activities of the Centre – with historic sites, outstanding dining, and exciting adrenaline-fuelled waterspots; and the South – where the country's Arabian heritage is preserved alongside rare wildlife and marine life; it's also easily accessible for a long weekend. Here's how to make the most of your next trip to the Saudi Red Sea.

NORTH - LUXURY & MARINE BEAUTY

Known for its fresh take on luxury that showcases the beauty of the sea, and its exclusive experiences – with great accessibility to nature, alongside immersive wellness journeys – the North area is a fantastic destination for those who love yachting, sailing, diving, hiking, and golfing. For an ideal two-day stay, begin with a direct flight to Red Sea International Airport. Check into the St. Regis Red Sea Resort, where you can engage in unforgettable overwater activities before enjoying the finest Japanese cuisine at Gishiki 45, then wind down with a spot of stargazing. The next day, tuck into a lush breakfast at Nesma, before finding more than 1,200 different species of fish and 300+ types of coral by snorkelling or diving in the Saudi Red Sea. Wrap up with a late lunch at The Beach Club, before your transfer to the airport for your flight back.

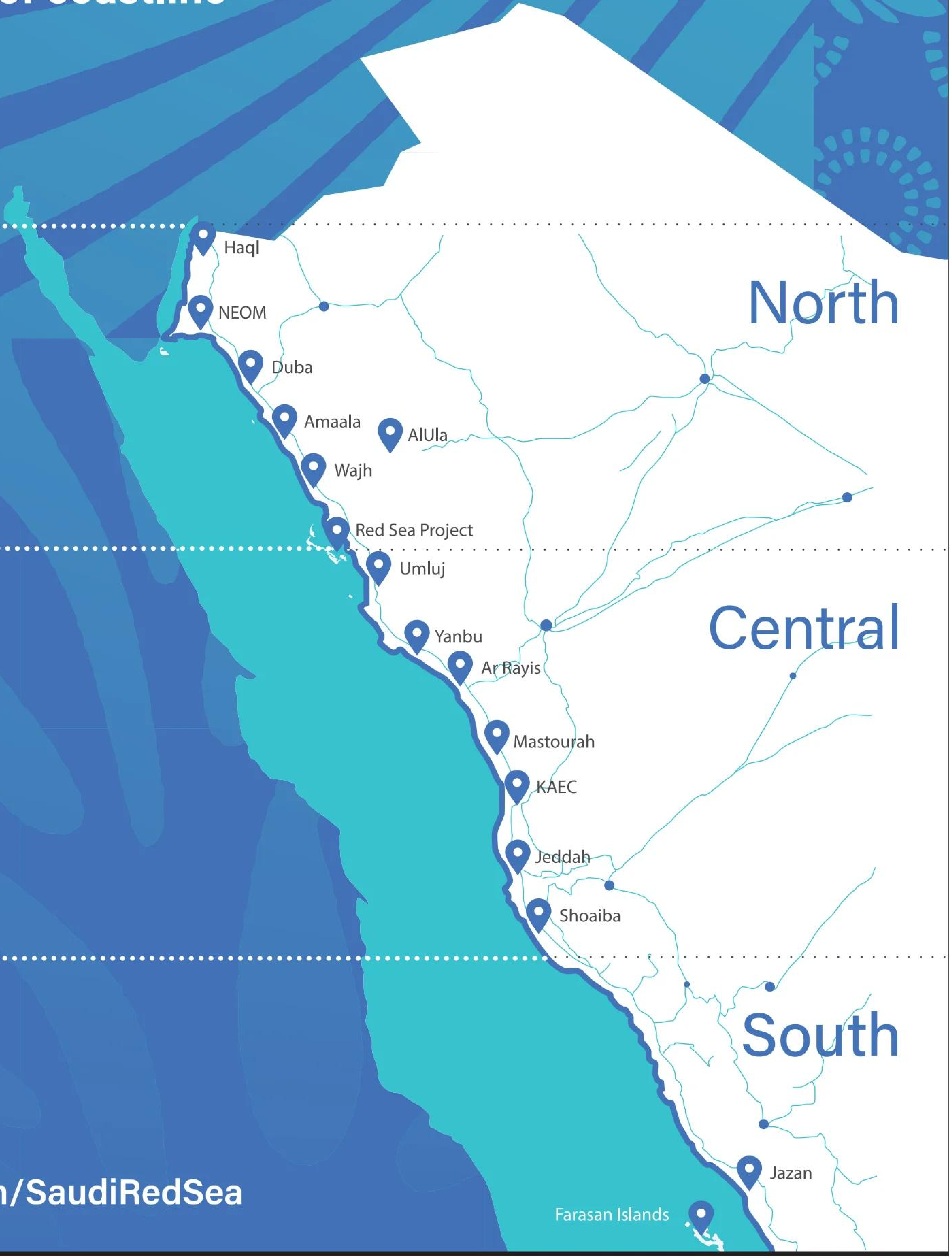
CENTRAL - ENTERTAINMENT & CULTURE

The lively economic and social Central area is a wonderful place to fill your soul with history and culture, or get your adrenaline pumping. Begin your day with breakfast at Jeddah gem The Social Bakery. The city has plenty of unique sights, from the Al Rahma floating mosque to King Fahd's Fountain – plus theme parks, museums, and more. For foodies, a meal at award-winning Kuuru is a must. Head to King Abdullah Economic City for water activities at Yam Beach, where you can also enjoy a relaxing lunch by the water. In the evening, take a walk around Jeddah Yacht & Marina Club before dinner at OBO Beach House. On your second day, welcome the sunrise with a horse riding experience on the white sand shores of the Saudi Red Sea. before heading to Al Balad, Historic Jeddah for a cultural tour, then dinner at Al Basali in the heart of the old district.

SOUTH - ARABIAN TRADITIONS & UNTOUCHED NATURE

A perfect escape for those seeking a more slow-paced, nature-filled escape, the South has plenty of culture and unique natural attractions to fill your camera roll. After breakfast at your hotel, head to the airport for a morning flight to Jazan, where you can refuel with lunch at the Radisson Blu Resort. From there, take a drive to Al Dosariyah Castle for a one-of-a-kind cultural experience. On a mountain overlooking the port of Jazan, this historic heritage site was first built in 1225. After taking in the views, head back to your resort for dinner. After another great resort breakfast that will give you energy for more new adventures, you can dedicate the second day to a tour of the Farasan Islands. At this small group of coral islands approximately 40km off the coast of Jazan, you can enjoy a breathtaking day of wildlife sightings and diving excursions before catching your flight home.

3 distinct areas
75+ pristine beaches
300+ corals
800 dive sites
1800km of coastline


Haql
NEOM
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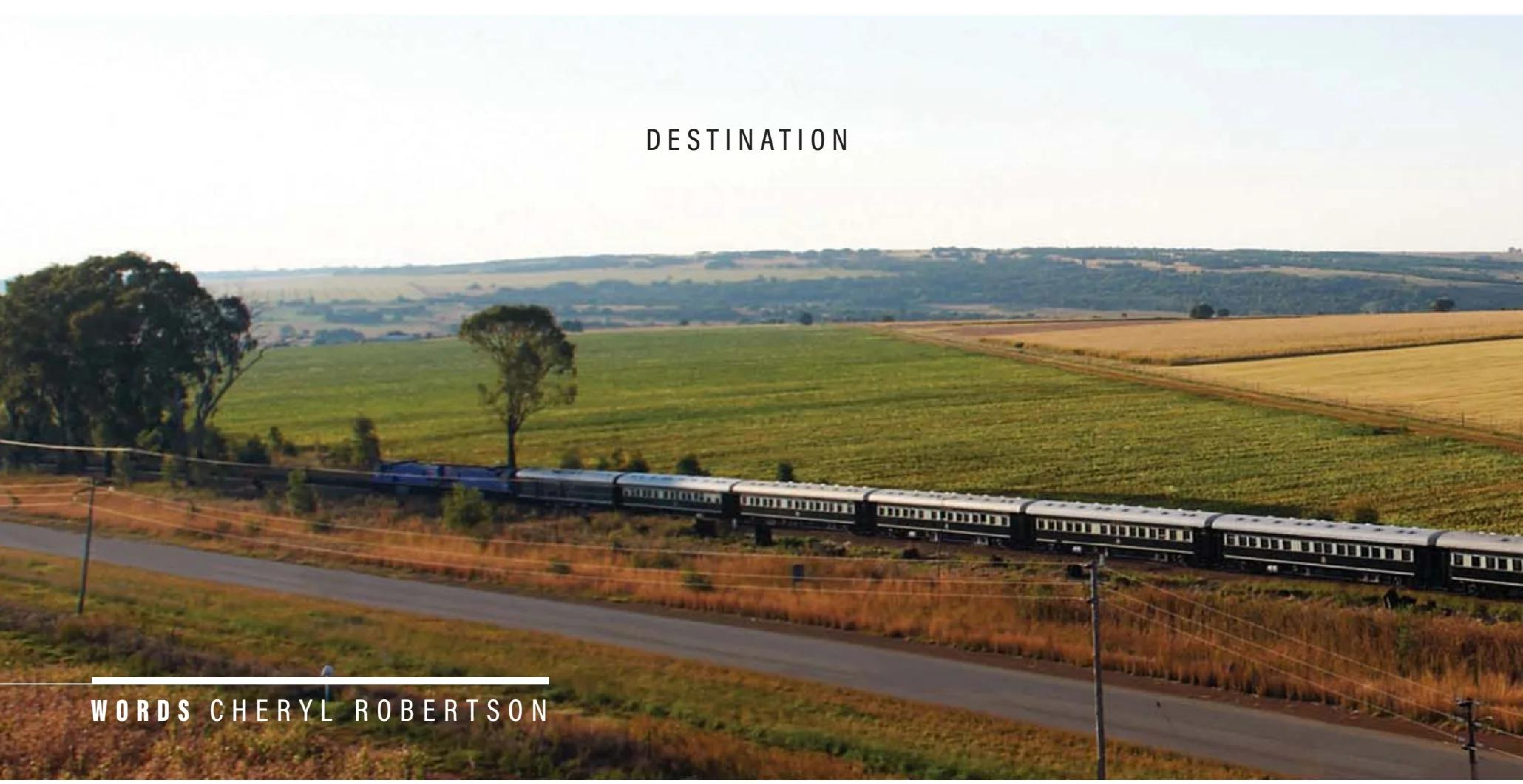
Jeddah
Shoaiba
Jazan
Farasan Islands
North
Central
South

VisitSaudi.com/SaudiRedSea



WORDS CHERYL ROBERTSON

Chugging back in time by train

Rovos Rail's range of luxury sleeper trains snake through Africa's less-travelled destinations, capturing the romance of rail travel in the golden era of the 1920s

Early in November I woke to the gentle cooing of a ring-necked turtle dove. As I pulled down the blinds of our Deluxe Suite to investigate I saw bushveld and a hut, heard distant cicadas warming up their zing, and recalled that train manager Darren had told us that at 0200 we would be stopping for a rest at Sawmills siding in Matabeleland, Zimbabwe. The peace was breathtaking.

There were no pings from my mobile phone. When there is no wifi, you realise you don't need it. When the 20-coach train creaked into action again, I lazily watched African scenes scroll by from the comfort of our huge plush bed, then started to wonder what was for breakfast. How could I possibly be peckish after last night's salmon gravlax, Springbok loin, and Amabutho cheese with a soupçon of clementine preserve, all paired with exceptional South African wines?

Let's not beat about the bush: luxury rail travel provides the ultimate escape from global worries and a stressful life. It's where you can relish every small detail of the journey, appreciate living slowly, and in the case of Rovos Rail's Pride of Africa, most elegantly.

ABOVE: North West Province

BELOW: Room Service

OPPOSITE PAGE: Dining Pillar; Obs Car Sunrise

Founded in 1989 by Rohan Vos, the family-owned South African company now operates six full train sets that are hauled by diesel or electric locomotives, and cover 11 itineraries lasting from 48 hours to 15 days.

Our four-night journey to Victoria Falls set off from Rovos Rail's own railway station at Capital Park in South Africal's administrative capital, Pretoria. A tour of the 60-acre site revealed the intricacies of the operation where maintenance takes place in-house; it's where skilled workers are based and spares stored. Engineers are also aboard each journey to ensure all goes smoothly on the train and the tracks. The railway lines and services are provided by the countries through which Rovos travels, so it has no control over them.

The old steam engines no longer haul carriages (too heavy on water and coal); however they are sometimes pulled onto the station for photographic opportunities – a novel touch when privately chartering a train or holding a special event. Weddings, business meetings, company functions, historical tours, family gatherings, golf days, bird shoots, and others have been

The aim is to encourage guests to converse, and soak up the atmosphere

organised on the train in the past.

Back at the passenger briefing in the departure lounge (57 of us – 72 is the maximum) we learned that there is a smoking lounge, that the dress code is strict, and that the use of mobile phones in public areas is seriously frowned upon. "Frankly," said host Joe who has served Rovos for 35 years, "It's vulgar."

The aim is to encourage guests to engage in conversations and cigars, soak up the nostalgic atmosphere, savour quality cuisine, and truly relax.

The silver service and regional fare was astounding. Hats off to the chefs for creating gourmet meals out of a tiny kitchen, and to the sommeliers who enthusiastically enlightened us on many fabulous unheard of South African wines such as The Fledge & Co Vagabond Blend, the Uva Mira Mountain Vineyard Shiraz, and the hand-picked Raka Cabernet Franc.

A soft melodious gong precedes lunch and dinner, served in two elegant Edwardian-style dining cars reminiscent of scenes from a →

TOP: Another Rovos Rail met en route

ABOVE: Deluxe suite

ABOVE RIGHT: Hwange National Park

Downton Abbey set. Daywear is smart casual; evenings are formal, yet the atmosphere is relaxed. A jacket and tie is a minimum must for men, and for women evening gowns are ideal. Some guests even fully embrace the 1920s theme for a bit of fun.

After our third multi-course dinner (smoked kudu carpaccio with pine nuts and Parmesan for starters, paired with a Raka Sangiovese), we meandered to the non-smoking open-air observation car at the rear of the train. The cool clear night was completely black; only the tops of the acacias trees caught the moonlight that shone from a thin crescent low in the sky.

Fellow travellers came from the USA, UK, Jersey, Europe, Hong Kong, and South Africa. Travelling by train, swaying rhythmically and at times substantially, is a fantastic way to feel Africa's past and witness its epic scale.

Rail has been in South Africa since around 1860, when colonists started to build a network of tracks. These were lifelines for many, including my Scottish grandmother and her six children, who travelled by ship from the United Kingdom to Cape Town then by train to Bulawayo 86 years ago. Our train stopped in Bulawayo too, so we were sort of following in her footsteps.

Some of the wood panelled rebuilt and refurbished sleeper coaches date back to the early 1900s. They were mostly lying derelict on sidings within South Africa, until the Rovos team found and restored them to their former glory, but with added modern technology.

Every suite has air-conditioning, and an en-suite bathroom with a hot shower, hair dryer, and shaver plug. The seating area has a desk with multiple plug fixtures. Mobile data is accessible in the suites, but there are spots in certain countries where there is simply no connection with the outside world. Revel in the freedom!

Three types of suites accommodate one or two passengers. The Royal Suite, taking up half a coach, has a bath tub plus shower. There's also a Deluxe Suite option (ours was named Apsey, after one of South Africa's earliest pioneers), and the smaller Pullman Suite, with a sofa-seat during the day that's converted into single, double or bunk bed for the evenings. It is useful to know that the ticket price is fully inclusive of all meals (vegetarian options too), alcoholic beverages, off-train excursions, room service, and a limited laundry service.

The hostess assigned to our coach, Koketso, ensured the mini bar was filled with our choice of beverages and neatened our suite at least three times a day. The staff are a cheerful, loyal, and attentive yet unobtrusive bunch – an indication of a well-run concern.

TOP LEFT: South Africa near Messina

ABOVE: Matobo National Park looking towards top of World's View

LEFT: Victoria Falls waterfall

> **The golden age of luxury train travel is by no means dead – it's alive, well and thriving**

Each journey has its own off-train excursions. After pulling into Bulawayo railway station's extraordinarily long platform, a private bus took us to join African Wanderer Safaris' tour of the Matobo National Park – a surreal landscape consisting of huge granite balancing boulders covered in multicoloured lichen. At World's View, where lies the grave of country founder Cecil John Rhodes there's a magnificent 360-degree view – it's no wonder the local Ndebele people deem this place sacred.

The next afternoon we rumbled into Hwange National Park and stopped for a safari provided by The Hide. In an eight-seater open vehicle, our guide (named Forget) found lion, zebra, elephant, roan antelope, giraffe, and all manner of smaller creatures. He also diplomatically advised an inquiring guest not to throw the mango she had at the bottom of her bag at a troop of baboons. Why anyone would even consider doing that was beyond me.

According to Rohan Vos, owner and CEO of Rovos Rail: "It was important to us from the very beginning that this wasn't just a train ride. We wanted our guests to learn a bit about this country, its history and its diverse culture, and of course, experience our magnificent wildlife."

On the cultural side, cricket enthusiasts may like to know that the ICC is helping Zimbabwe construct a multi-sport stadium just outside Victoria Falls town as the country will co-host, alongside Namibia and South Africa, the ICC Cricket World Cup in October and November 2027.

Excitement built up as the train slowly approached Victoria Falls station, a humble colonial style building where we were greeted by enthusiastic Zimbabwean singers and dancers in traditional warrior gear. What a fitting end to an incredible journey.

The golden age of luxury train travel is by no means dead – it's alive and well and thriving in southern Africa. BT

Bratislava and beyond

Discover medieval sights and meeting sites in this alternative European capital

WORDS TOM OTLEY

FROM LEFT: Bratislava Castle looms over the city; The UFO Tower

Bratislava might not be top of your list when it comes to European destinations, but perhaps it should be. Until now, most visitors have seen it as a brief stop on a Danube cruise between Budapest and Vienna. In reality, however, the Slovakian capital is an ideal alternative to neighbouring Vienna. Only a 40-minute drive from the international connections of Vienna International Airport, it is less crowded and considerably less expensive, yet still packed with plenty of ways to fill an exciting itinerary.

Since 1993, when Czechoslovakia split into the Czech Republic and Slovakia, both countries have been transformed. Slovakia, and particularly its capital, offers outstanding venues, food and drink options, and a host of activities. There's plenty to do in the city and its surrounding region for a three- or four-day trip, with memorable meeting venues and experiences. Here we offer some of our top recommendations.

Bratislava Castle

Standing proud above the city for centuries, though largely rebuilt in the 1950s, Bratislava Castle is a must-visit. The castle has a number of meeting venue options for large groups, plus a lively calendar of public events, from wine tastings, and craft beer festivals to jazz weekends and more among them. Arguably though, it is the Museum of History, views across the city and the formal baroque garden that are the real draws.

Identify the UFO

Along with the castle, the observation deck standing atop the main bridge that spans the Danube River is an essential site (and sight). Take the lift up to the viewing platform on top of the UFO Tower to get your bearings from the 9m-high pillar. Better still, stay for a meal. The normal rule of thumb that 'the better the view, the worse the food', does not apply here. This is fine-dining – the restaurant ranks in the top five in the capital – and can seat up to 130 for a banquet. (See page 50 for more dining recommendations.)

Main Square

All visitors will spend time in Hlavné námestie (Main Square), which is populated with stunning landmarks. To the south is the historic Carlton Hotel (now a Radisson Blu property), while the Neo-Renaissance-style Slovak National Theatre dates from 1886.

Also here you'll find the Reduta, designed in the early 20th century and triumphantly reimagined in the last decade for the Slovak Philharmonic. It has beautiful function rooms available for hire, with a roofed courtyard for outdoor-style events and a maximum capacity of 320 guests for banquets.

A short walk away, the Old Market Hall, which opened in 1910, has had several different lives since the market moved elsewhere, including a stint as a television studio. In the past decade, it has become a multifunctional hub offering space for cultural events, large-scale art installations, a farmers' market on Saturdays and a large event space that can be rented for up to 1,500 people.

OUTSIDE THE CAPITAL

If you're prepared to venture half an hour outside of Bratislava, you will be well-rewarded with a wealth of authentic cultural experiences, ranging from wine and beer tasting through to traditional pottery and luxury hotels.

Danubiana Meulensteen Art Museum

Open since 2000 and expanded in 2014, the Danubiana in Čunovo is perched on a peninsula between branches of the Danube, 20km south of Bratislava. It was founded by Gerard Meulensteen of Eindhoven, a Dutch collector and art patron, and Vincent Polakovič, a Slovak

→

IMAGES: BRATISLAVA TORUIST BOARD; 123R

gallerist. Here you'll find an impressive collection of work from Slovak and European artists, plus an outdoor sculpture park. The gallery can host events of 100-150 guests, and there is a beautiful café with river views as well as large terrace area.

White water rafting

The Divoká Voda Water Sports Complex located on the Danube nearby, is an outstanding facility offering 15 exciting sports activities including white water rafting, kayaking, jet skis, river surfing, archery, paintballing and bike riding. It's popular with leisure and MICE visitors alike, hosting up to 250 events each year for up to 5,000 guests. The site offers team-building programmes that strengthen all attributes of teamwork (efficiency, time-management, communication, strategy and trust). There is a basic 24-room Divoká Voda hotel on-site, but the facility is close enough to Bratislava for a day trip.

FROM TOP: Slovenska L'udova Majolica Factory Shop; The Danubiana Meulensteen Art Museum; Traditional glazed ceramics

Traditional pottery

Majolika is a type of richly-coloured, bold-patterned glazed earthenware that's popular across central Europe. To see it being made and decorated – and even to have a go at 'throwing' your own pot – head to the Slovenska L'udova Majolica Factory Shop in Modra. The development of Modra painted ceramics was influenced by a sect of anabaptists knowns as the Habans, who were exiled from Alpine countries in the 17th century and travelled to western Slovakia. Today, typical decorations range from the traditional to the topically amusing.

ON CLOUD WINE

Wine tasting in the dark

To really appreciate Slovakian wine, a visit to a vineyard is essential. Ahead of time, however, you can prepare yourself with a tutored wine tasting – in the dark. These novel sessions take place in a historic wine cellar underneath the Palace Apartments at Michalská 3. Expect typical grapes from the region, but also some surprises as you struggle to even identify the correct colour of the wine. It's great fun and a perfect levelling experience for anyone who claims to be an expert oenophile.

ELESKO Wine Park

Nestled at the foot of the Little Carpathians mountain range, the

WHERE TO EAT

UFO

Outstanding views, particularly on a summer's evening at sunset, are matched by the food from head chef Jozef Masarovic. There are various tasting menus, including a four-course lunch, but the eight-course tasting menu (€119) shows the full range of the kitchen, included sturgeon with potato and a 63-degree egg; and lamb with Jerusalem artichoke, spruce, and hazelnut. Adding six wines for pairings costs another €39.

Narbon

Opened in February 2024 on Lavrinska Street, and run by the Shabani family who are originally from Albania, there are dishes from Spain, Greece, Albania, and Portugal, alongside Italian classics. The restaurant has two rooms, and the entrance would be ideal for a standing reception, while the dining hall can be used as a lecture room for up to 110 guests. The sample price for a main course at lunch – say, tortellini with black truffle and ricotta – is €25.

Irin

Irin is right next to St Martin's Cathedral on Rudnay Square with a cobbled, tree-shaded entrance. Under head chef Lukáš Hesko, opt for the nine-course tasting menu (€95), with a wine (€50) or non-alcoholic pairing (€45). The austere interior is more than made up for by the warm welcome from the staff, and the cooking is among the best I have ever tasted.

GETTING AROUND

Take the Oldtimer bus

With a population of around 500,000, Bratislava isn't a large place, and the beautiful historic centre can be walked around in a couple of hours, though if you visit all the galleries and museums, you will need longer. If you do get footsore on your explorations, you could hop on one of the "old" buses (based on a Škoda model 1203, though actually newly made), with commentary available in many languages, giving details on the buildings you pass on the way up the Castle hill. A perfect alternative for those who might struggle with longer walks.

Speedboat ride

An interesting way of getting around is via a speedboat ride along the Danube. There are jetties in the city centre from which you can head to the nearby border between Austria and Slovakia, see the countryside which surrounds the city, and head downriver to where the 'old' Danube and the main channel – dredged for larger ships – split. You'll also see all the side channels, houseboats and new developments taking place alongside deep forests and the remains of bunkers and fortifications guarding the river.

FROM TOP: Enjoy wine tasting in the Slovakian capital; The Golden hall Katarína Pálffy at the Palace Art Hotel Pezinok; Writer Tom Otley travels the city by speedboat

ELESKO wine park is a gorgeous modern working winery with exceptional event and meeting spaces surrounded by vineyards. Its also home to the Zoya Museum art gallery, with a permanent Andy Warhol collection, as well as a restaurant and bar. Owned by the private equity Eastfield Group, there are also plans to create on-site accommodation. For the time being, Bratislava's hotels are only a 30-minute drive away.

Palace Art Hotel Pezinok

This 13th-century castle in Pezinok has been carefully reconstructed, complete with its 800-year-old wine cellar. As well as an on-site wine museum, there is a luxury 48-room hotel offering modern accommodation at very tempting prices – roughly half the price of Bratislava yet only a 30-minute drive away (or a €2 bus ride). The hotel looks out over a peaceful park (disturbed only by the colourful peacocks) and has both a fine-dining restaurant or a more casual eatery with a lovely terrace.

Pálffy Manor House

The Pálffy family were rich aristocrats in their day (hence the number of namesake palaces in the region). The Pálffy Manor House in the small town of Svätý Jur is a particular highlight. It houses the VIAJUR Winery, popular for tours and events, and also offers tutored beer tastings at the Pálffy Brauerei brewery. The main house has on-site accommodation and numerous halls, many adorned with original antique paintings and portraits of the Habsburg family – don't miss the largest room, the Pro Rege et Patri hall dating from 17th century (but now with high-tech equipment). BT

Multisport >
1.50 km
40.00 km
10.00 km
2

WORDS HELEN DALLEY

WELLNESS WEARABLES

Track and enhance your mental and physical health with the latest in wellness tech

Wellness wearables have become increasingly commonplace as we seek to count the number of steps we've taken, monitor our sleep patterns, or track our heart rate and stress levels. The first wireless heart rate monitor – the Polar Sport Tester PE2000 – made its debut back in 1982, but it wasn't until the Fitbit hit the shelves in 2007 that fitness trackers really took off.

Thanks to advancements in technology and AI, the wellness wearables market has evolved considerably, with the latest offerings including smart rings that track respiration or skin temperature, and headsets that zoom in on emotional well-being and even help alleviate depressive symptoms. Here's seven of the best gadgets to track and boost your physical and mental health.

1 MUSE S

If you struggle with sleep or relaxation, the Muse S smart headband might be just the thing to help you drop off more easily. The brain-sensing headband acts as a dedicated meditation and sleep coach, using EEG sensors to detect brainwaves and provide real-time feedback on your mental state during meditation to indicate whether your mind is calm or active. It can also be paired with the Muse app, which offers guided meditations, breathing exercises and sleep aids. Crafted from soft, breathable stretch fabric, the headband is designed for overnight comfort. It can also be used throughout the day for quick meditation sessions or breathing exercises to help manage stress.
Dhs1,570; healf.com

IMAGES: ANDRE STRINGARI; SUPPLIED

2 SAMSUNG GALAXY WATCH7

Samsung continues to expand its range of wellness wearables, with the new Galaxy Ring, Galaxy Watch7, and Galaxy Watch Ultra launched in 2024. The Galaxy Watch7 can accurately track more than 100 workouts and help you build routines and set goals. With Race mode, you can compare current and past performance in real-time to track progress and maintain motivation. In addition to an even more advanced AI algorithm for sleep analysis, the Galaxy Watch7 can also check for potential signs of sleep apnoea.

Plus it offers ECG and blood pressure monitoring. You can also track advanced glycation end products (AGEs) right from your wrist with an inbuilt AGEs Index. Influenced by diet and lifestyle, AGEs reflect your biological aging process and provide an indication of metabolic health.
Dhs1,355; samsung.com

3 FLOW HEADSET

Backed by more than 30 years of research and clinical evidence, the Flow headset delivers transcranial direct current stimulation (tDCS) via an app to stimulate the brain and help relieve depressive symptoms. Launched in 2019, the brand has partnered with more than 200 mental health clinics who are experts in tDCS and can oversee the initial Flow treatment of around ten weeks. It's recommended that you stimulate for 30 minutes five times a week for three weeks, then reduce to twice a week.

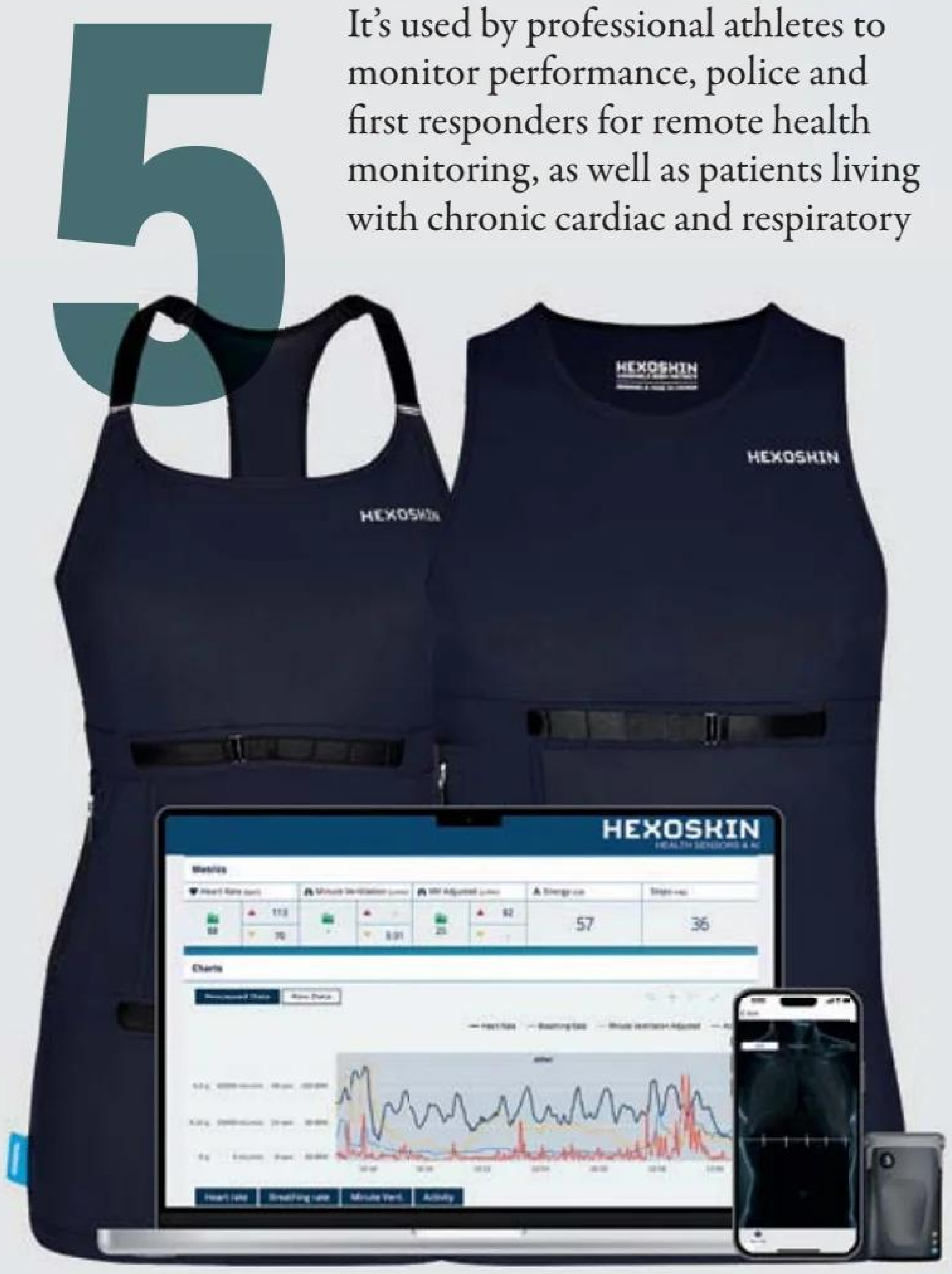
Flow's affiliate clinics can monitor your progress, increase the number of weekly stimulations and offer other forms of therapy. The headset comes with a charger, instruction booklet and five weeks' worth of refill pads, which ensure the effectiveness and comfort of the sessions. **Dhs1,870; flowneuroscience.com**

4 ULTRAHUMAN RING AIR

Celebrated for its sleek, lightweight design – it weighs between 2.4 and 3.6 grams depending on the size – this smart ring tracks sleep, activity, heart rate, glucose levels and body temperature among other health metrics. The Ring AIR will help you understand how sleep, stress, skin temperature and heart rate variability (HRV) affect your body and gives you real-time actionable nudges towards better health and well-being. With a battery life of up to six days, the ring is coated with medical-grade hypoallergenic epoxy resin, making it comfortable at all times. **Dhs1,542; ultrahuman.com**

5 HEXOSKIN PRO KIT

The Hexoskin ProShirt is an advanced biometric smart garment featuring ECG and respiratory sensors to monitor activity and stress levels in combination with the Hexoskin Smart recording device. It's used by professional athletes to monitor performance, police and first responders for remote health monitoring, as well as patients living with chronic cardiac and respiratory conditions. Compatible with iOS and Android devices, Hexoskin provides a companion app and cloud platform that enables you to view and analyse your data in real time. Featuring a 36-hour battery life, the ProShirt is made from breathable, moisture-wicking fabric and the sensors are seamlessly integrated into the garment so it feels like a regular sports shirt. It's also machine washable and has built-in UV protection. **Dhs3,286, hexoskin.com**



6 NOWATCH CHRONOS CLASSIC

Designed to help users stay mindful and connected to their well-being without the distractions of a typical smartwatch display, the Nowatch Chronos Classic features interchangeable gemstone faces and watch straps so it can be customised depending on the occasion or what you're wearing. Designed to help users manage stress and promote mindfulness, the device alerts you to moments of high stress and offers suggestions such as breathing exercises or mindfulness practices. Unlike many smart watches, it doesn't have any notifications, preferring instead to encourage users to disconnect from digital alerts and focus on the present moment. **From Dhs2,109; nowatch.com**

6
NOWATCH
AMSTERDAM

7 BARACODA BMIND

It's not a wearable, but the Baracoda BMind deserves a mention as it's the world's first AI-powered smart mirror tailored towards better mental health. Launched at leading Las Vegas tech show CES in January 2024, and available to buy from December 2024, it can identify your moods and help manage stress levels with personalised recommendations based on your mental state using gesture recognition, voice command and intent detection. If you're feeling down, expect light therapy sessions and self-affirmations from the comfort of your own bathroom. **From Dhs1,836; baracoda.com** BT

GOOD BUYS

Start 2025 with our pick of treasures that are well worth treating yourself to, before a busy new year of travel for business, leisure, and bleisure!

TECH & LIFESTYLE

MEZE AUDIO
105 AER
Headphones
Dhs1,676
mezeaudio.com

ruarkaudio

R1S Smart Radio
Dhs1,634
shop.kitkemp.com

MOLESKINE
CASA BATLLÓ

MOLESKINE
Casa Batlló
Notebook
And Pen Set
Dhs270
selfridges.com

OURA Ring 4,
Health and Fitness
Tracker Smart Ring,
Gold Edition
Dhs2,340
ouraring.com

DOCK & BAY
100% RECYCLED
QUICK DRY TOWEL

DOCK & BAY Travel
Towel, Marine Dream
Dhs131 *johnlewis.com*

SWAINE Cigar
Humidor 120 **Dhs23,343**
swaine.london

Peloton Bike
Dhs7,465
johnlewis.com

LOEWE We. HEAR Pro
Bluetooth Speaker X
Kylian Mbappé
Dhs1,167
loewe.tv

IMAGES: SUPPLIED; PATRICK PARCHET; NEIL WATSON

BEAUTY & FASHION

COMFORT ZONE The Night Garden Nourishing Glow Face Kit **Dhs602** *uk.comfortzoneskin.com*

IWC Portugieser Hand-Wound Tourbillon Day & Night **Dhs310,468** *iwc.com*

V&A The Great Mughals Wash Bag **Dhs117** *vam.ac.uk*

CHRISTIAN LOUBOUTIN So Kate Suede Heeled Boots **Dhs4,435** *harrods.com*

BIALETTI X DOLCE & GABBANA Sicilian Carretto Moka Express Hob Espresso Coffee Maker **Dhs350** *johnlewis.com*

SWAINE Merino Wool Versailles Throw **Dhs2,288** *swaine.london*

JIMMY FAIRLY The Lily Sunglasses **Dhs630** *jimmyfairly.co.uk*

PRADA Saffiano Leather Briefcase **Dhs15,874** *harrods.com*

Montblanc Happy Holidays Cabin Trolley **Dhs4,552** *montblanc.com*

BARBOUR Heritage 'For Him' Eau de Parfum 50ml Gift Set **Dhs261** *thefragranceshop.co.uk*

Shining Bright

Jewellery brand **Au Finja** shares its secrets for retail success

Established in Dubai in 1997 with just two employees and a refurbished second-hand machine, jewellery brand Au Finja's story is one of perseverance and success. "I often say, 'Well-planned is half done' – a principle that has guided our early days in the business," says the brand's chairman and CEO, Ajay Sobhraj.

Nowadays, Au Finja has emerged as one of the Middle East's largest innovative jewellery manufacturers. The company employs over 500 skilled artisans and professionals across four manufacturing facilities in the UAE, India, Oman, and Germany. Specialising in CNC machine-made bangles, rings, cuffs, and kadas (a traditional bracelet from India) made with gold, diamond, and platinum, Au Finja has cultivated a robust customer base in the Middle East, North America, Europe, Africa, and Asia Pacific regions. In 2020, it expanded to the US, Australia, and the UK.

Over the years, Au Finja has demonstrated resilience alongside its growth. In 2018, it launched its YuMe Collection, which soon joined its list of signature items. In 2022, it became a supplier to a leading global jewellery brand, while its Mumbai facility celebrated its 25th anniversary. In 2024, the company inaugurated a state-of-the-art factory in Oman, capable of processing over five tonnes of gold annually.

Despite its great success, the jeweller has not been immune to the price volatility of gold, platinum, and diamonds. As consumer demand has responded in kind, Au Finja has reiterated its efforts to provide value through exceptional quality, and understanding what their key needs are. "Festive and wedding seasons are crucial for sustaining demand, particularly in cultures where these traditions hold significant importance. We've observed a shift towards premium, exclusive designs, with consumers seeking jewellery that reflects their individuality and personal stories," Sobhraj says.

"Dubai's rich cultural heritage in jewellery-making also profoundly influences our designs. The city has long been a centre for artisanship, where traditional craftsmanship meets modern luxury. We take great pride in upholding the high standards of craftsmanship that Middle Eastern jewellers are renowned for. Our ability to blend this heritage with cutting-edge innovation allows us to craft timeless and contemporary jewellery, setting us apart from global competition," Sobhraj says.

Sobhraj explains that the company's manufacturing facility in Dubai empowers them to respond to adapt alongside customer demands more quickly and accurately. The company has been an early member of Dubai Exports since 2017, and Sobhraj himself has been an active board member of the Dubai Gold and Jewellery Group since 2015, always working to contribute to Dubai's efforts to establish itself as a leading player in international markets, and establish its reputation as the "City of Gold," and "Jewellery Destination of the World."

Dubai Duty Free is a key retail partner for Au Finja, offering them major visibility and access to a diverse global audience. "As one of the world's largest and most renowned Duty Free retailers, its prime location in Dubai International Airport ensures our products are seen by millions of international travellers each year. This unique environment not only elevates our brand's prestige, but also allows us to reach a wide range of customers, from luxury connoisseurs to frequent flyers." At Dubai Duty Free, Sobhraj says, many customers are drawn to exclusive styles that aren't available anywhere else. The way people shop while travelling also differs slightly from other retail environments. "For many, the purchase represents a memorable part of their travel experience – a luxury item to commemorate a special occasion or a significant trip. This emotional connection makes the act of buying gold jewellery feel more meaningful," he says. "Duty Free shoppers also often feel a sense of urgency, as their time in the airport is limited. This creates an exciting, fast-paced atmosphere where decisions are made more impulsively."

Looking ahead to 2025, Sobhraj says: "We plan to expand our talented team, tap into new markets, and launch a wider range of product collections by maximising the capabilities of our four manufacturing facilities. I see advancements in technology enhancing both product quality and the overall customer experience; and the rising interest in personalised jewellery presents a unique chance for us to introduce bespoke collections that resonate with our customers. Additionally, our entry into new markets like Oman and Germany will drive further growth."

However, Sobhraj is staying mindful of the challenges ahead.“ The volatility in gold prices could affect production costs, but we remain committed to delivering high-quality, innovative designs that maintain their value. Economic uncertainty may lead to potential downturns in spending, requiring us to adopt adaptable strategies. The intense competition in the jewellery industry will push us to continue standing out through our innovation, craftsmanship, and strong branding. And while supply chain disruptions may pose challenges, our established manufacturing network will help us mitigate these issues. I believe 2025 holds promising opportunities for Au Finja in sustainability, technology, and global expansion. While challenges may arise, we are well-prepared to face them with the same resilience and visionary mindset that has defined our journey thus far."

IMAGES: SUPPLIED; ADOBE STOCK

Business Traveller MIDDLE EAST

the Report

Tried, Tested, Tasted.

TRIED AND TESTED RAIL
Eurostar Business Premier 60
London-Paris

TRIED AND TESTED RESTAURANT
Tang Town 61

TRIED AND TESTED HOTEL
Travelodge London Oval Cricket Ground 62

SMART TRAVELLER
Our guide to… 64
great hotels for layovers in the GCC

Eurostar Business Premier
LONDON-PARIS

BACKGROUND Eurostar operates e320 trains to Paris Gare du Nord from St Pancras International. The journey takes around two hours 27 minutes, and runs up to 17 times per day. I travelled in Business Premier (business class) on the 0801 train, arriving at 1118 local time. The main benefits of Business Premier are ticket flexibility, additional luggage (three pieces along with one piece of hand luggage), complimentary F&B service, and fast-track queues.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS I used the Eurostar app to manage my booking, save my ticket to Apple Wallet and keep track of my trip. The ticket flexibility is great. You can exchange the date/time with no fee (except the fare difference) up until the day before your trip, or get a full refund. You can also exchange or get a refund if you decide not to travel up until 60 days after your booked departure date. Plus, you can switch to an earlier or later train on the day of travel, without paying a fare difference.

Business Premier customers can arrive 45-60 minutes before departure. I arrived at 0645 and headed for the queue-less priority lane for Business Premier, Carte Blanche and Étoile members of Club Eurostar.

There are also SmartCheck biometric gates here, which use face-scanning technology to eliminate the need for manual passport checks. I hadn't registered with the company iProov, so did not use the gates.

THE LOUNGE The Business Premier lounge is a narrow stylish space set over two floors, with a spiral staircase plus lift access. Bookshelves are stocked with a range of complimentary magazines and newspapers (including *Business Traveller*).

A jazzy bar upstairs serves smoothies in the morning and cocktails from 1500. Fridges feature soft drinks, beers, juices and yoghurts, while a buffet includes pastries, bread, cereals and cold cuts. There are also coffee and tea facilities. Seating has UK and EU plug sockets, along with USB slots.

BOARDING My train was called at 0740 from the lounge. A staff member greeted me by name and checked me in with an iPad. Seats are in a 1-2 configuration, with four seats at a table, seats in pairs and single seats. I was in a window single seat.

THE SEAT The seats are identical to those in Standard Premier, but more spacious than those in Standard, with lots of legroom, a lever to slightly recline the seat and built-in reading lights. Single seats have a pull-down tray table, while seats facing each other have a larger communal table.

> **It remains the superior service for those travelling from London to Paris**

My seat had an EU plug socket, which I found irritating as my adaptor was in my luggage, but thankfully it had a USB slot (not available in Standard). There are racks for luggage at the end of the coach plus overhead compartments for hand luggage. Wheelchair spaces are in coaches 3 and 14.

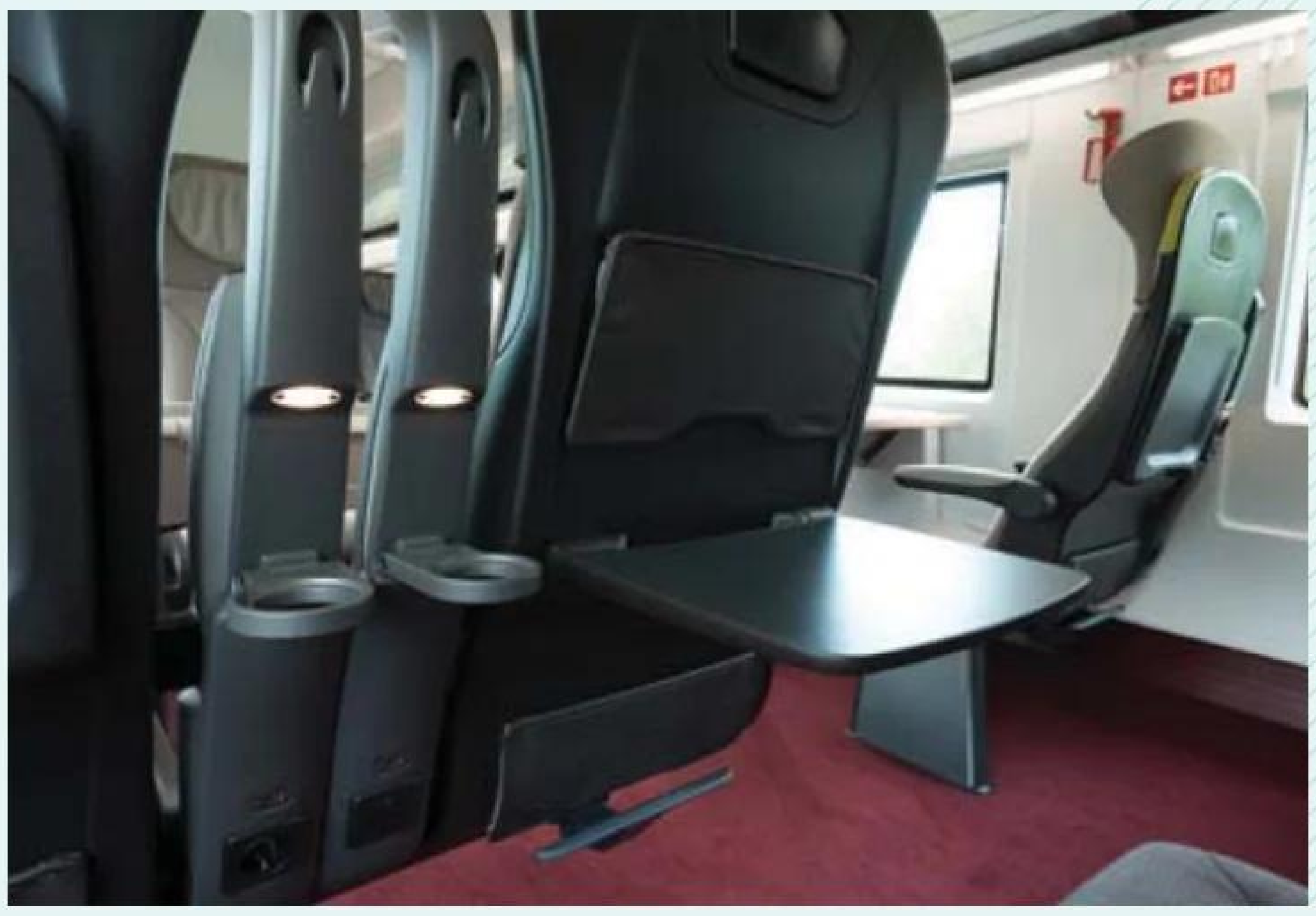
FOOD AND DRINK Business Premier offers three-course meals in collaboration with chef Raymond Blanc OBE. Menus vary depending on the date/time of travel, as well as the route. Breakfast and brunch are served before 1014, lunch is offered thereafter and dinner from 1715.

Service began at 0835. Breakfast was a cold croissant and bread roll, yoghurt with linseeds and compote, and a tasty spring onion and Emmental frittata with stuffed mushroom, spinach, and tomatoes. Drinks include a mini smoothie and water bottle – and Piper-Heidsieck Champagne during lunch and dinner services. Coffee and tea are served by staff throughout the cabin.

THE JOURNEY We left promptly at 0801 and the journey was quick and stress-free – apart from temperamental wifi.

ARRIVAL We arrived on time at 1118 and disembarked quickly, with no need to pass through any border controls.

VERDICT Eurostar remains the superior service for those travelling from London to Paris – and Business Premier, while costly, eases strains that Eurostar may face thanks to ticket flexibility, lounge access and a great meal service. ***Hannah Brandler***



BEST FOR
Stress-free, eco-friendly travel to Paris

SEAT CONFIGURATION
1-2

PRICE
Internet rates for a midweek return Business Premier class fare from London to Paris in October start from £275 each way

CONTACT
eurostar.com

Tang Town

BACKGROUND Named in homage of the Tang Dynasty, this restaurant's mission is to serve premium Chinese cuisine as authentically as possible. They honour legendary dishes and cooking techniques that have been passed down for hundreds of years, staying true to the classics while incorporating traits of modern fine dining through the highest-quality ingredients, stunning presentation, and a beautiful setting. It's led by chef Billy Zeng - a native of China's Guangdong province who has had more than 20 years of experience in the field of culinary arts, having worked in high-end kitchens and luxury hotels.

THE VENUE The restaurant is on the Fountain Views side of Dubai Mall's Chinatown extension, on the Mezzanine Floor. To get there, drive to the main gate of The Address Fountain Views on Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Boulevard, where valet parking is available. Once inside the building, head up the escalators, then turn left, where Tang Town's hostesses will greet you. The décor instantly transports you to another world: its interiors are inspired by the imperial splendour of the Tang Dynasty, and aim to impart a luxurious, palatial feel. It manages to capture the essence of ancient grandeur while also remaining sleek and modern, offering a sophisticated setting that feels distinctly upscale. For an intimate group gathering, they also have five private dining rooms capable of hosting groups of six, eight, 10-16, or 14-20 guests.

WHAT'S IT LIKE? Although it's right next to a busy street by the mall, even on the terrace, you'll feel far removed from the hustle and bustle of the city thanks to the lush green foliage that separates you – and the gentle music with constant birdsong, which plays both outdoors and indoors. The staff are friendly and welcoming, and although the setting is undeniably polished, the overall vibe is still warm and accessible.

FOOD AND DRINKS Although some of the décor might suggest you're in yet another modern Asian fusion restaurant that mainly pays tribute to its cuisine's origins through decorative elements, one look at the menu here will make you realise this is anything but. Dishes rarely found outside of East Asia, from crispy pigeon to marinated goose, braised sea cucumber or bird's nest, and geoduck poached in congee soup, sit comfortably alongside more popularly-known options such as fried Australian lobster, barbecued Wagyu beef, steamed grouper, or stir-fried Alaskan king crab. For more daring diners, there's even turtle on the menu. Regardless of what you choose, it's all presented in a way that begs you to eat with your eyes as much as your tastebuds. Ingredients are extremely important here – the chef tried options from across the world to source the very best with which to make each dish, including some locally-sourced items. There is a dim sum menu available both à la carte and as part of the weekend Dynasty Brunch menu, and the chef can curate a custom menu for private dining. In every case, the Roasted Peking Duck is a must-try. This is Peking Duck like you've never had it before: it tastes impossibly crisp and delicate, with each one – dry-aged, before being specially shaped, glazed, air-dried, and roasted to perfection – expertly sliced at your table. The crispy skin is served three ways; in artful rectangles atop fresh melon that form bite-sized flavour-bombs; rolled with cucumber and rich hoisin sauce in soft, warm home-made pancakes; and as plates of tender, juicy meat. Dessert is also a delight, with a range of authentic East Asian sweets presented just as meticulously as the rest. The restaurant is licenced, with an extensive list of drinks – plus Chinese teas.

> **This is Peking Duck like you've never had it before – it tastes impossibly crisp and delicate**

SERVICE You won't just be served the dishes here – you'll be presented them with an artful flair that they require to be done justice. Service is friendly and polite, with staff that are well-informed in their specialities, and happy to educate you too.

VERDICT A singular venue for a taste (or exploration) of genuine Chinese cuisine. Go in with an open mind for dishes you don't recognise, or to enjoy Chinese classics like you've never had them before. I'd even return for the Peking Duck alone. ***Yi-Hwa Hanna***

HOURS
Open daily, from 10am to 1am

LOCATION
Mezzanine Floor, Dubai Mall Fountain Views

DRESS CODE
There is no official dress code, but to respect the setting, smart casual or smart elegant is advised

CONTACT
+971 4 431 2888; tangtownrestaurant.com

IMAGES: TANG TOWN RESTAURANT

Travelodge London Oval Cricket Ground

BACKGROUND The new-build hotel opened in April 2024, marking the group's 600th property, and its 81st in London. The property was developed in partnership with Surrey County Cricket Club, whose home is the Kia Oval located opposite the hotel.

It is one of the first to feature both the new room design and the 85 Bar Café concept – a nod to the brand's first UK hotel in Barton-under-Needwood in 1985. Travelodge plans for 50 per cent of the group's room estate to be upgraded by the end of the year.

WHERE IS IT? On Kennington Oval, a couple of minutes' walk from Oval underground station on the Northern Line and around half a mile from Vauxhall station, with links to central London via both National Rail and the Victoria line.

WHAT'S IT LIKE? Sometimes you find hotels take on the name of a landmark to suggest their proximity to said location, only for you to find out on arrival that they are still a fair distance away. That is not the case here. The property is opposite the Hobbs Gate entrance to the stadium, and many of the rooms look straight across to the ground. The smart design extends to public areas and there is cricket-related artwork on walls, including bats, balls, stumps and ties.

ROOMS Of the 95 rooms at this hotel, 75 are standard and 20 are SuperRooms, the latter offering their own design scheme and enhanced facilities including a Lavazza coffee machine, Hansgrohe three jet adjustable shower, a hairdryer, iron, and ironing board. Both categories have double, family, and accessible room options.

I was staying in a standard double room on the third floor, which had a great view across to the Oval. The new design is smart, with a mix of blue and white walls, and a feature picture above the bed – in my room this was of a scene from *The Owl and The Pussycat*, and the quote: "They danced by the light of the moon."

> It is opposite the stadium and many of the rooms look straight across to the ground

The bed had space underneath to store luggage, and bedside table alcoves with plug and USB power points.

Facilities included air con, a 32-inch TV with Freeview channels, an armchair and open hanging area. There was also a desk area with a kettle, tea, and coffee facilities plus a lamp. In total, the room had seven plug points, three USB A, and three USB C points. Guests get 30 minutes of free wifi, with packages available from £3 for 24 hours, up to £35 for a month's access.

The bathroom had a walk-in shower with unbranded hair and body wash. Unfortunately, the fabric nature of the curtain meant that water escaped onto the floor, and with no bathmat I had to place the hand towel on the floor to avoid slipping. My other grumble concerned the blackout curtains on the windows, which let in light around the sides, top and bottom.

FOOD AND DRINK The dining area is bright, with ornaments, cricket-related books and plants. For dinner, I had the £14 meal deal, which includes a main course and either a side or dessert. Travelodge being a budget chain, I wasn't expecting to be wowed by my food – but the chicken skewers on a lemon and herb-dressed salad with quinoa and brown rice was delicious, so much so that I ordered it again the following night. A self-serve breakfast is served between 7am and 10am weekdays (8am-11am weekends) and priced at £11.25 per adult (kids aged 15 and under eat free).

VERDICT The hotel is perfectly located for anyone attending an event at the Oval, but it's also well connected to central London. It feels smart and modern thanks to the new room and cafe design. ***Mark Caswell***

BEST FOR

The Oval cricket ground being on your doorstep

DON'T MISS

Delicious chicken skewers and rooms overlooking the stadium

PRICE

Internet rates for a flexible midweek stay in November for a standard room start from £160

CONTACT

52 Kennington Oval, London, SE11 5SW;
08719 846629; travelodge.co.uk

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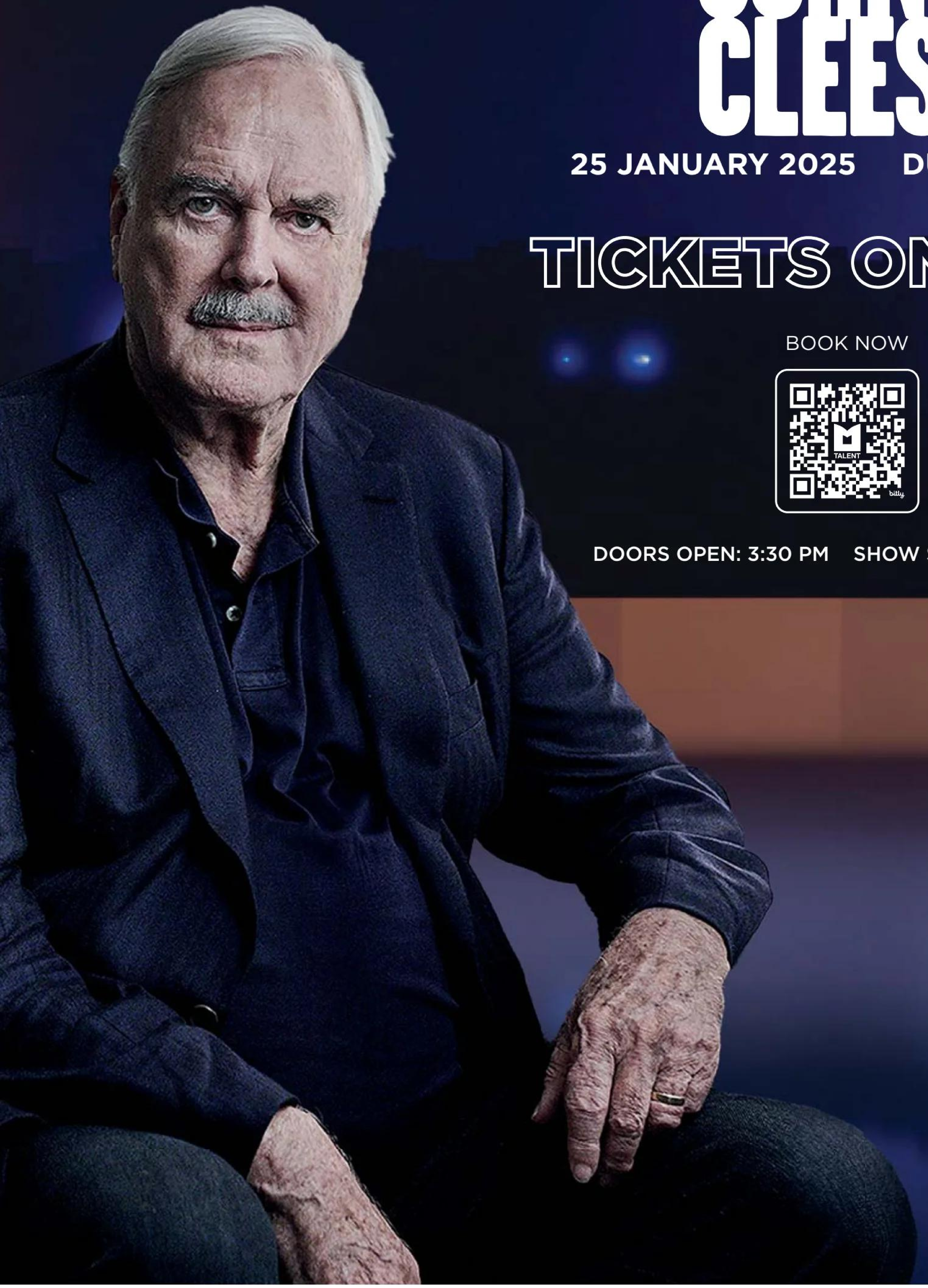

MOTIVATE
MEDIA GROUP

Our guide to...

great hotels for layovers in the GCC

WORDS YI-HWA HANNA

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IX

Whether you're on the starting side or tail end of a long flight – or caught in the in-between – when it comes to layovers, the main thing most of us are looking for in an airport hotel (or airport-adjacent hotel) is the ability to rest and recharge, before we have to jet off once again. Yet there are some that can be so much more than just a place to shower, eat, and catch some shut-eye. From hotels with runway views for outstanding plane-spotting to those with serene spas and lush pools, here are some picks for your next layover stay across the GCC.

DUBAI INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT HOTEL

Described as a "five-star sanctuary located in the heart of the world's busiest and most exciting airport", this property – also known as Hotel DXB – is located airside in Terminal 3, with entrances from Concourses A, B, and C. This means if you're transiting, you don't need to pass through customs and immigration. It boasts a spa (complete with a relaxation pool, hydrotherapy spa bath, steam room, and sauna), a restaurant for premium dining, room service, and spacious and comfortable modern rooms. You can also access Duty Free shopping while staying here.

PREMIER INN DUBAI INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT

Easily accessible through a free shuttle bus from Terminals 1 and 3 – that are just a 10-minute drive away – this cozy property serves up all of Premier Inn's most beloved qualities, including its ability to feel like a home away from home. Plane-spotting enthusiasts will love the fact that many of its 281 rooms offer exclusive runway views, as does its rooftop swimming pool. The hotel also has a well-equipped gym. The brand's custom-made beds – known for their ability to support quality sleep – can also be found here, as can their famously good English Breakfast (alongside Arabic, Asia, and Indian options), and much-loved Mr. Toad's Pub & Kitchen. The rooms have also just been beautifully refurbished.

LE MÉRIDIEN DUBAI HOTEL & CONFERENCE CENTRE

This five-star hotel is a two-minute drive from Dubai International Airport, with 15 hectares of gardens, idyllic pools, an excellent and vast spa and fitness centre, various meeting and event venues, and a buzzing nightlife spot. It also offers a free shuttle service to and from the hotel and Terminals 1 and 3.

ALOFT DUBAI SOUTH

If you're jetting in and out of Dubai's Al Maktoum International Airport (DWC), the Aloft Dubai South – part of the Marriott Bonvoy network – isn't just minutes away from flights – it's also a hop and a skip away from attractions such as Dubai Parks and Resorts and Expo City Dubai. The hotel has an outdoor pool, a 24/7 fitness centre, a bar and a restaurant, a convenience store, a gift shop, and meeting rooms.

PREMIER INN ABU DHABI AIRPORT (BUSINESS PARK)

Also commonly known as the Abu Dhabi Airport Hotel, this comfy hotel from the British hotel chain is 6km away from Abu Dhabi's Zayed International Airport, with a free shuttle service to Terminal A. It has three dining options – including a Costa Coffee and a modern sports bar-lounge – and is within easy reach of Yas Island and The National Aquarium.

ORYX AIRPORT HOTEL

Found within the passenger terminal of Doha's Hamad International Airport, this four-star 100-room transit-only hotel has spa services, a swimming pool, and other recreational facilities including squash courts, a swimming pool, and virtual golf. On the fourth floor is the Vitality Wellbeing and Fitness Centre, with complimentary access for hotel guests. Rooms can be booked for a maximum of 24 hours, and paid access to facilities is available to non-guests for a fee.

RADISSON HOTEL RIYADH AIRPORT

With 471 spacious rooms including family connecting options, plus duplexes and villas, it also has a fantastic spa, health clubs for men and women, and various dining choices – including an all-day option, casual café, and 24-hour room service. That's not all: it has not just one but five (yes, five) pools, three of which are outdoors, with one heated option, and two indoor pools. This outstanding airport hotel also boasts 1,828 sqm of conference space for corporate and private events. It's little wonder that it won the title of "Best Airport Hotel in the Middle East" at the *Business Traveller Middle East* Awards 2024. The property also has a kids club, and is pet-friendly – with a solid commitment to sustainability principles as well. It's just 5km away from King Khalid International Airport, costing around SAR 50 for the five-minute taxi ride from the terminals.

AEROTEL JEDDAH

Found within the Departures Area of King Abdulaziz International Airport's Terminal 1, guests have to clear a security checkpoint for transit passengers to get to the hotel, but do not need to clear arrival immigration – and are advised not to, since you will not be able to re-enter the restricted area without a valid onward boarding pass, which is subject to the opening of the various airlines' check-in counters. Once inside, you'll find three considerably spacious room types with various pillow options, strong showers, and food and drinks at their Aerotel Lounge & Café on Level 2. There are also prayer rooms available. Online bookings can be made with pretty short notice, but must be done so at least one hour prior to your arrival at the hotel.

MÖVENPICK BAHRAIN

Just 10 minutes away from Manama's city centre, and a two-minute walk from Bahrain International Airport, this five-star hotel has a stunning outdoor pool surrounded by acres of lush nature, three renowned food and beverage outlets (one of which has been described as having the best brunch in the country), alongside 106 newly-renovated rooms, including 10 suites.

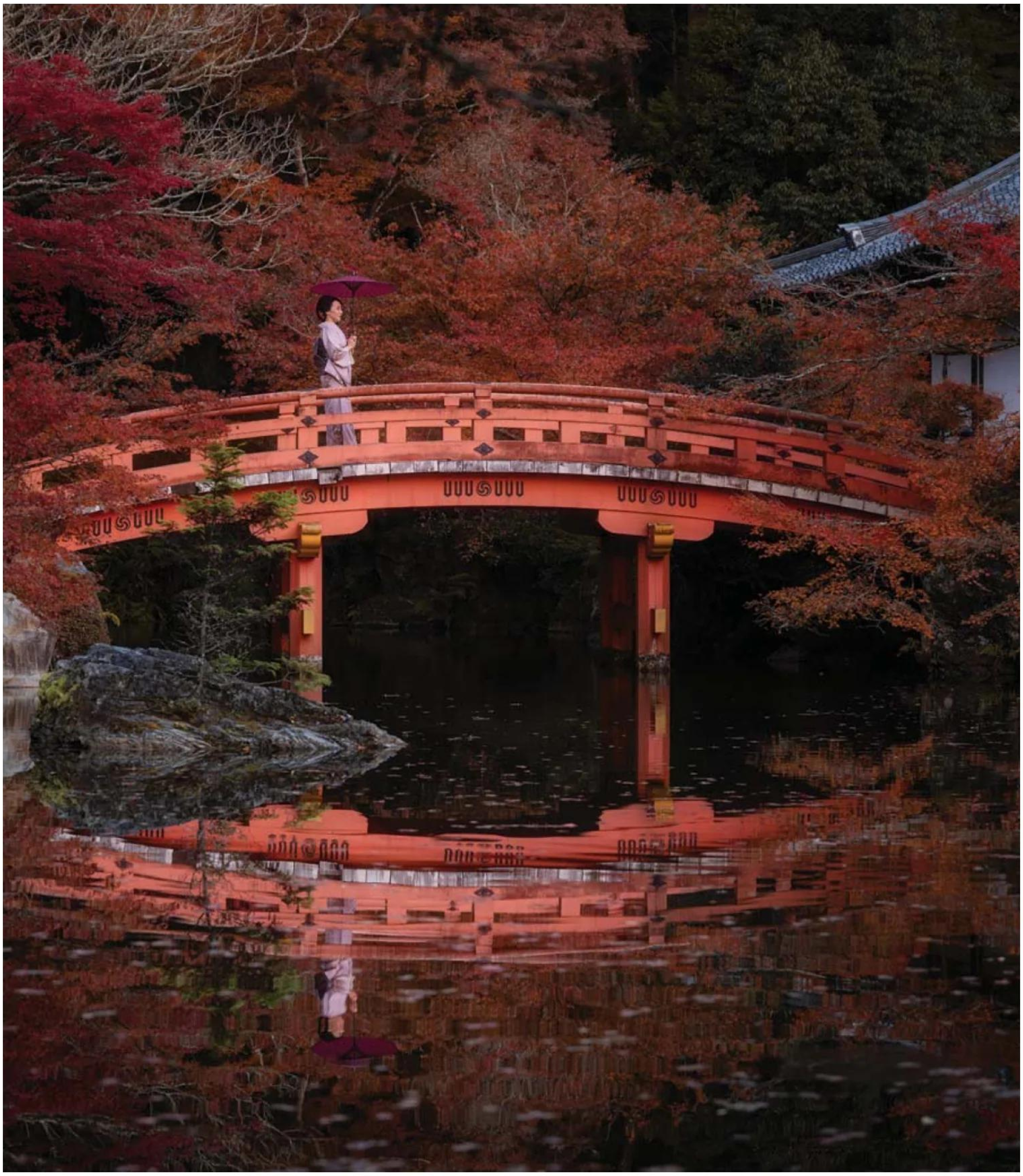
NOVOTEL MUSCAT AIRPORT

This hotel is a 10-minute drive from Muscat International and close to Oman Convention & Exhibition Centre, making it an excellent pick for busy business and MICE travellers – plus anyone else who needs a convenient layover stay. The hotel itself has six meeting rooms and a ballroom, as well as four restaurants, a fully-equipped gym, an outdoor swimming pool, and a wet relaxation area with steam rooms. The 215 rooms are modern, spacious, and comfortable. BT

No time for an actual hotel stay? Catch some zzz's on even the shortest layovers at the Sleep n Fly at Dubai International Airport T1 or Hamad International Airport Doha's North Node, or make use of the Sleeping Pods at Jeddah's JED airport.

IMAGE: ALWIE99D/ADOBE STOCK

FRAME THE STORY



The Unique Magic of Momiji

Already a perennial favourite for travellers from across the world, in recent years, Japan has become an increasingly popular destination for travellers from the Middle East. Last year, Japan Airlines launched a Doha-Tokyo route that became the first-ever flight to/from the Middle East by a Japanese airline. Those who have their heart set on visiting during the country's annual cherry blossom season, at the start of spring, are strongly advised to plan and book ahead. For a unique alternative that may come with fewer crowds, a photography tour of Japan can be a great pick any time of year. Led by Dubai-based photographer Andy Marty – who runs these tours everywhere from Japan to Iceland – these offer both novice and expert photographers the chance to develop their skills while travelling across the country. "Autumn is a truly magical season to travel to Japan, with the incredible colours of the red maple leaves, known locally as Momiji. In this image, local model Mitsuyo is photographed at Daigo-ji – a beautiful temple near to Kyoto," says Marty.

IMAGE: ANDY MARTY PHOTOGRAPHY (ANDYMARTYPHOTOGRAPHY.COM);
IN PHOTO: MITSUYO (@MARRON_0826 ON INSTAGRAM)

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